

BOOK REVIEWS

Governance in Singapore BY ROSS WORTHINGTON [London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.
xii + 371 pp. Hardcover: £60] *Editor's Note: This book is now out of print.*

Governance in Singapore uses the concept of hegemony to explain how Singapore is governed. The author, Ross Worthington, defines hegemony as “in some sense corporatist, authoritarian and oligarchic and even elitist with overtones of the garrison state; but it is also more than all these separately” (at 248). He focuses on the core executive and its relationships and interactions with key institutions in Singapore, going beyond the assumption that a government’s political executive is simply the cabinet presided over by the Prime Minister. Observing that the cabinet requires resources and support from a range of organizations and individuals. Worthington makes the point that “embedded in an institutional, social, cultural and economic matrix, the political executive operates through a range of relationships which dynamically facilitate or inhibit its policy program in relationship to the relative strength of institutions and the personal power of the executive” (at 15).

In the book, the core executive in Singapore is divided into three main groups: the bureaucrats, the political elite and select professional elite. In detail, they are the Prime Minister, the political executive including cabinet and non-cabinet ministers, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Attorney-General, the Chief Justice, the judges of the Court of Appeal and the Senior District Judge, Permanent and Deputy Secretaries in the civil service and their equivalent in the statutory boards, Administrative Service officers within the public sector executive in the civil service, and statutory boards, 78 key members of statutory boards and government-linked companies (GLC) boards and the chief executives of the major government holding companies and GLCs, some members of the general staff of the Singapore Armed Forces, members of the Council of Presidential Advisers, the Chairman of the Public Service Commission, the Auditor-General and other actors derived from the National Trades Union Congress, the private sector and possibly the grassroots organizations. Members of these elite are mainly drawn from the bureaucracy and the political executive with the professional elite “on the periphery” (at 20). Noting that there is no inclusion of those below the middle class, Worthington assesses that the elite will continue to be in the driving seat of this hegemonic approach to governance in Singapore. That Worthington’s study totally leaves out grassroots representation from the core executive raises the question of the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the overall development of Singapore’s social and political culture. Although there is evidence to suggest increased participation among the young in CSOs, and more social activism through

both government and non-government channels, the likelihood of CSOs significantly changing the nature of governance appears to be low.

Worthington's study also comments on the similarities and the differences between the Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong administrations. His research allows the reader to get a sense of the fundamentals of how Singapore has been governed, and the many intricate power relations therein. Although some of his conclusions are not new, they are useful as his findings support the works of scholars such as Chan Heng Chee who first described Singapore as an "administrative state" in the early seventies (see Chan Heng Chee, "Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?" Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, Occasional Paper No. 11, 1975). She had observed that there was shift of meaningful politics to the bureaucracy. Worthington has confirmed this. Worthington's experience in public policy and extensive interviews with the core executive has produced a book that is rich in details. Some of the information and arguments he raises bring to mind earlier observations about possible problems such as the lack of accountability and transparency in the centres of power. The author describes in detail how Goh Chok Tong has managed to create his own power base within a system that has been dominated by Lee Kuan Yew. Worthington pinpoints factions within the core executive and their corresponding power bases. Worthington also writes extensively on two incidents—namely the exchange involving the new Prime Minister and the Chairman of the DBS Bank, and the significance of the court case against Tharman Shamugaratnam, a former Director of the Economics Department of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), now Minister of Education and Deputy Chairman of the MAS, over the flash estimate of economic growth in the second quarter of 1992. Interestingly, no action, such as a libel suit, has been taken against the author with regard to his description of the first incident. As for the incident involving the flash estimate, Worthington believes it reflects the dilemma of balancing greater economic liberalization with the protection of the sanctity of the *Official Secrets Act* (Cap. 213, 1985 Rev. Ed.), which is seen as one of the fundamental pieces of legislation that provides the framework within which the Singapore public service operates.

The book also reads like a who's who of Singapore as the author has compiled many interesting lists such as the list of core people on statutory boards and GLCs in Singapore, and a list of members of the Singaporean core executive who are ministers, statutory office holders and Singapore Armed Forces general staff. Although some of the lists have become outdated as his research was undertaken more than two years ago, it does give a considerable insight into the rationale behind the appointment of persons from the elite group to the boards of GLCs and statutory boards. He observes that there is a group of dominant individuals who sit on the various boards and they come mainly from the public sector and do overlap the boundaries between boards, GLCs, the civil service and the military establishment. Worthington also produces a ranking among this group of individuals. He suggests that the main determinants for a person to be included in the management of boards and GLCs are personal attributes, management ability, intellectual ability and loyalty to the government.

Worthington observes that although the style of leadership may have been different between Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, the power functions of the executive has not changed, "it has merely re-distributed them among the executive". He cautions that Singapore under the People's Action Party (PAP) has

provided the country with a constitution that allows reform only through the PAP itself. In his opinion, effective long-term national institutional strategies require society stabilizing options to be built into the system. Worthington sees monopolies as inherently unstable in the long term. According to him, the danger is that “it can become so separated from society that it begins to operate on the basis of a framework within which the broader society cannot identify.”

Thus, in his conclusions, Worthington suggests a modernization program for Singaporean democracy which calls for the creation of a two party system within which both parties share allegiance to certain broad ideological positions and a governance framework derived from the current model. It “introduces greater and more authentic competition into the political system,” and “should moderate the harsh and socially divisive approach to current opposition.” A more important objective of this is to provide a more controlled way for democratic development in Singapore by defusing much of the passive resistance to the PAP. Rather than a straightforward splitting of the current ruling party, Worthington envisions a grooming of a younger opposition party within the PAP ideology. His projection is that in the long-term, a possible solution for Singapore as it transits from a top-down driven system to one that is accepted bottom-up without enforcement is “to prepare a bi-polar hegemonic system over the next 15 years and the concurrent preparation of the next generation of PAP leadership to have the ability to rotate power between the two parties in peaceful transitions” (at 250). For this to take place, Worthington believes that six major reform components are needed: constitutional reform, electoral reform, judicial reform, parliamentary reform, public sector reform, and the development of a proto-PAP political party. Regarding judicial reform, Worthington stresses the importance of the judiciary being genuinely independent of the political executive. His ideal is a situation in which those “talented enough to join the Supreme Court in particular do not need to act on behalf of the political executive to protect society.” The development of the judiciary outside of the civil service, in the author’s view, is vital to a healthy democracy and nation.

Worthington concludes that “the greatest challenge facing the contemporary core executive in Singapore is not economic or social; it is the challenge of providing Singapore with a sustainable political system that is robust and has genuine legitimacy that is not enforced from above, but transparently accepted as legitimate from the grassroots” (at 249). Recent developments within the PAP seem to suggest that there is recognition that the level of engagement, even within the party, needs to be broadened from the top to the grassroots level. The formation of the Refreshing PAP Committee and plans to give PAP members more say in policy-making and electing representatives are indications of this.

Worthington reiterates the need for a genuine attempt to renegotiate state-society relations. He believes that if current institutional arrangements continue, the most likely outcome in the next 10–15 years would be even more widespread political apathy than is now apparent. The author concludes that while the current core executive has the intellectual and organizational ability to prepare a bi-polar hegemonic system, it does not have the will to do so. At the same time, he also seems to think that certain parameters affecting Singapore are realities that cannot be avoided, that “the scale of society, geography, culture and institutions is such that if one remains

dedicated to staying in Singapore, one must negotiate and compromise to a degree far greater than in large more dispersed polities” (at 249).

Overall, *Governance in Singapore* is a valuable contribution to the growing literature on how Singapore is managed. The observations of the core executive and the key institutions pose interesting and pertinent questions about challenges that Singapore is likely to face so long as the management of success is premised on a single party hegemony.

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