

**The Political Process and
the 2001 Parliamentary Elections in Singapore**

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Abbreviations

CPF	Central Provident Fund
GRC	Group Representation Constituencies
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
IND	Independent
MP	Member of Parliament
NCMP	Non-Constituency Member of Parliament
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
SCMP	South China Morning Post
SDA	Singapore Democratic Alliance
SDP	Singapore Democratic Party
PAF	People's Action Forum
PAP	People's Action Party
WP	Workers' Party

Executive Summary

On November 3, 2001 the People's Action Party (PAP), the governing party in Singapore for the past four decades¹, was returned to office with a landslide victory. The PAP increased its percentage of total valid votes received, in constituencies where seats were contested, from 65% in 1997 to 75% in the 2001 elections². This was the largest margin since the 1980 elections, and translated into an 82-2 seat advantage in the legislature.

While the margin of victory was not predicted, the outcome itself was no surprise. In fact, since less than half of the 84 elective parliamentary seats were contested, the PAP's win was never in doubt. Nevertheless, opposition parties had to confront several obstacles that impeded their ability to participate effectively in the political process. These included: restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly; the government's control over the election machinery which permits the members of the ruling party to determine when elections will be held, how constituency boundaries will be drawn and the length of the campaign period; and the use by government officials of defamation lawsuits to threaten, humiliate and possibly bankrupt their political opponents.

The PAP's campaign, however, did not rely on these measures alone. Its victory was also partly due to disciplined and sophisticated campaigning, the selection of attractive candidates and consistent reminders that the ruling party had guided the city-state on its path of rapid economic growth and development. The ruling party's leadership utilized all of its considerable resources to convince voters that it needed an overwhelming majority and a resounding mandate to steer the country through perilous times with confidence.

The opposition political parties fashioned campaigns encouraging citizens to vote for their parties as a method of installing necessary checks and balances on the power of the ruling party; the need to avoid a *de facto* one-party state; and as a way to improve transparency and accountability. Despite the obstacles that they faced, the opposition was also able to put forward several proposals that received considerable public attention and elicited responses from the PAP. These proposals included providing more help for those who had suffered most from the current economic crisis; adopting a basic minimum wage for workers within a "Singapore Workers First" framework; and the opening of the Central Provident Fund (CPF) as a way to bail out those who have run out of savings.

There are 84 elective seats in Singapore's parliament. Nine members are elected from single-member constituencies and 75 from multi-member constituencies that each elect between five and six members. The five opposition parties competing in the elections employed a political strategy to contest only 29 of the available 84 seats³. The Singapore

¹ The PAP has been in power since 1959, when Singapore became self-governing. On May 30, 1959 elections to the first fully elected Legislative Assembly were held. The PAP won 43 out of the 51 seats and formed the new government.

² Since the seats contested in 1997 were different from those in 2001, these statistics have to be interpreted cautiously.

³ The opposition's original intention was to contest in slightly more seats, but some of the Workers' Party nomination papers were found to be invalid and rejected by election officials. The opposition historically has not contested in every constituency for two reasons. First, it wants to assure the electorate that the PAP will retain its majority, while at the

Democratic Alliance (SDA) fielded 13 candidates, the most by any opposition party. The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) contested 11 seats.

The SDP seems to have been the principal target of the governing party and Dr. Chee Soon Juan, the party's leader, was repeatedly accused of pursuing a foreign agenda. As election day approached, PAP leaders threatened Chee with a lawsuit over a statement Chee made during the campaign. The statement concerned a loan that the government offered to Indonesia in 1997 (the governing party maintains that the loan was contingent on conditions that were not met and, contrary to the implications of Dr. Chee's statements, the loan was not actually made). A short time after the election, a lawsuit was actually filed against the opposition leader.

During the course of the electoral campaign, the opposition complained about the unfair electoral process and unbalanced playing field. Government attempts to distribute benefits as a way of persuading voters to support the PAP was also cited as evidence that the PAP was unfit to govern. The opposition parties, however, seemingly failed to make the connection between the policies they were advocating and individual voters.

The PAP vigorously defended itself and its policies. PAP candidates offered rebuttals to some of the opposition's economic proposals and asserted that using CPF money to assist people who were suffering economically was originally their party's idea. In addition, the party used a clever mixture of carrot and stick approaches with voters to help ensure its decisive victory.

In the post-election period, the government's attention has focused upon the global economic downturn, its impact on Singapore, and the long-term implications of a prolonged economic recession in the United States and Europe as a result of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The Prime Minister represented Singapore at the ASEAN annual meeting and the economic team was beginning to outline a strategic role for Singapore in the proposed greater free trade area between ASEAN and China.

Responding to criticism about the lack of an effective opposition in the new parliament and the dangers this may pose for the democratic process in Singapore, the PAP initiated discussions on establishing an alternative policy group within the legislature. The proposed new group, referred to as the Peoples' Action Forum (PAF), would, according to the Prime Minister, be made up of 20 PAP MPs who would be released from their obligations to whip. They would, then, be free to challenge government policies in Parliament.

In the aftermath of the elections, commentary on Singapore's future ensued. Some Singaporean political observers suggested that the electorate had voted predictably and pragmatically, expressing their "developmental", conservative preference for the PAP. Several other commentators wondered aloud if Singaporeans really wanted an opposition,

same time, offering an opposition voice in parliament to provide a check on the ruling party's power. Second, the opposition would have difficulty in recruiting candidates in any case, partly because of obstacles posed by the government's policies and practices, and partly because of the opposition's limited appeal to voters.

arguing that voters were to blame, themselves, for the poor opposition showing. One political commentator in the *Straits Times* stated that Singaporeans should stop pretending that they were democratic just because formal elections were held.

The results of the 2001 elections have, then, again raised questions regarding the nature of Singapore's political process. With its unbalanced playing field and the curtailment of meaningful political discourse (that is, discourse that includes government critics and opposition party leaders), Singapore is out of step with other East Asian countries--such as Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand—which have liberalized their political systems and opened them to competitive political processes. Although its sophisticated economy has, until recently, prospered, Singapore's political system is increasingly viewed, even by some supporters of the regime, as a relic of a different time. Whether Singapore's citizens will continue to embrace a political system that is increasingly viewed as out of date, while the economy slides into recession and the rest of the continent moves in another direction, is uncertain.

The prospects for democratic change in Singapore's political system in the near term seem slight. The rules governing the political process effectively prevent opposition parties from communicating alternative policy agendas to the public, except during the brief campaign period. Nor do the rules permit them to recruit and mobilize supporters on the same basis as the governing party. The voters are not exposed to an open debate on issues concerning democratization between elections. Singaporeans are also understandably grateful for the material comforts that have resulted from the government's policies.

The challenges to Singapore's democratic activists include: changing the electoral rules so that opposition parties can compete on a level playing field; and developing a greater understanding and appreciation among voters that an effective, independent opposition is needed in any democratic process. Many Singaporeans believe that their support for the opposition could be personally catastrophic. Their career prospects could plummet, or worse. Overcoming such sentiments will likely take much effort in the years ahead.

I. Historical Background and Constitutional Structure

The British purchased Singapore Island in 1824. Two years later it became part of the Straits Settlements, along with Penang and Malacca. The Straits Settlements became a British Crown Colony in 1867 and remained in that status until 1946 when it was dissolved and Singapore became a separate Crown Colony. In 1959, Singapore became self-governing and it joined the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak, forming the country of Malaysia, in 1963. Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 and became an independent Republic.

Singapore is culturally diverse, with persons of Chinese ancestry forming the majority of the population (about 77%); Malays (14%); and Indians (7%). Its early days of independence were turbulent, marked by the threat of a Chinese communist insurgency and incidents of communal violence⁴.

The Republic of Singapore, now a country of approximately four million people, is a city-state with a governing structure generally patterned on the British system of parliamentary government.⁵ There are four official languages--Malay (the national language), Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil and English. The language of administration is English. Chinese dialects were spoken as a first language by 37% of the population in 1990. The principal religions are Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism.

Under the Constitution, Singapore citizenship may be acquired either by birth, descent or registration. Persons born when Singapore was a constituent state of Malaysia could also acquire Singapore citizenship by enrolment or naturalization under the Constitution of Malaysia.

Legislative power is vested in a unicameral parliament. Singapore's constitution provides that the legislature shall consist of elected and "nominated" members. These are: members who are elected by universal adult suffrage for up to five years terms; no more than 6 non-constituency members to ensure representation of a party (or parties) not represented in parliament; no more than 9 "nominated members" appointed by the President (who appoints persons from among those nominated by a special select committee)⁶.

⁴ See Lee Kwan Yew, *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (2000); Ooi Seng, "Singapore" in *Political Party Systems and Democratic Development in East and Southeast Asia*, Vol.1: Southeast Asia (1998), p.343.

⁵ Amendments to Singapore's post-Federation constitution established institutions that depart significantly from British practice. Thus, Singapore has a directly elected President, as well as a Prime Minister; and multi-member constituencies, as well as single member districts.

⁶ Non-constituency and nominated members have limited rights in the legislative chamber and are not permitted to vote on several important matters, such as bills to amend the constitution, money bills, votes of no confidence in the government and motions to remove the President from office.

Type of Member in Parliament: 1997

Type	Number
Elected (MP)	83
Non-Constituency Member (NCMP)	1
Nominated member (NMP)	9

The President may dissolve parliament, if so advised by the Prime Minister. After parliament is dissolved, there must be a general election within three months.

A constitutional amendment was introduced in May 1988 establishing “group representation constituencies” (GRCs) that would supplement single member districts. These GRCs would return “teams” of three Members of Parliament. At least one member of each team was to be of minority (non-Chinese) racial origin. In January 1991, the constitution was further amended, stipulating that the number of candidates contesting group representation constituencies should be a minimum of three and a maximum of four. The maximum was increased to six by constitutional amendment in October 1996. The party with a plurality of votes wins all of the seats.

The President is directly elected by universal adult suffrage for a six-year term as a constitutional head of state, vested with limited powers of veto in financial matters, public appointments and detentions for reasons of national security. Effective executive authority rests with the Cabinet, led by the Prime Minister, who is appointed by the President and responsible to Parliament.

II. The Electoral Framework

Singapore’s electoral framework for parliamentary elections is principally governed by the constitution, the Parliamentary Elections Act and the Political Donations Act of 2000, although other laws also affect public participation in elections and the political process⁷.

Singapore, as mentioned, has a plurality elections system. Voting is compulsory⁸ and turnout routinely exceeds 95%. There are currently nine single seat constituencies and 14 multi-member constituencies (group representation constituencies, or GRCs).⁹ The electoral process is overseen by an Election Department. The Minister of Home Affairs appoints registration and returning officers who are responsible for registering voters and conducting the polls.

⁷ These include the Societies Act, The Internal Securities Act and the Public Entertainment Act.

⁸ Persons who do not vote without a valid reason are removed from the electoral rolls and must pay S\$5.00 to be placed back on the register of electors. It seems doubtful that this small fee explains the consistently high voter turnout rate, above 95% in 1997 and 2001.

⁹ In 2001, 75 MPs were elected from multimember constituencies (GRCs) and 9 from single member constituencies. Of the 14 GRCs, 9 of them each elect 5 members, and 5 each elect 6 members.

Parliamentary elections must be called within three months after the end of a five-year parliamentary term. The Prime Minister, however, can also dissolve parliament and call for snap elections. After the Prime Minister calls for elections, a writ of election is issued. Nomination day takes place five days to a month from the date of the writ. The official campaign period is nine days to eight weeks from nomination day.

The November 3, 2001 elections were called on October 18, 10 months before the maximum five-year period would expire. In fact, there were only nine official campaign days¹⁰. In addition, constituency boundaries were announced only one day before the elections were called, providing candidates and their parties little time to organize a campaign. This likely resulted in a substantial advantage for the PAP, which, as the governing party, needed less preparation time.

Election expenses are regulated under the Parliamentary Elections Act and donations under the Political Donations Act. In the 2001 elections, expenditures for each candidate were limited to S\$3.00 per elector in single member constituencies. In GRCs, the limit was S\$3.00 for each elector divided by the number of candidates in each party slate.

Campaign expenditures are strictly regulated. All expenses of more than S\$10.00 must be accompanied by a bill and receipt. These form part of the return, which must be submitted to the Returning Officer within 31 days of the official election results being published in the *Gazette*. A list of all contributors and persons paying the candidates expenses or providing loans must also be provided.

Certain election-related expenses are prohibited. These include paying for the transportation of voters to or from the polls. No campaign activity, such as displaying flags and banners, can take place on election day. The Minister of Home Affairs also has the power to regulate the display of posters and banners. The Minister also is authorized to regulate election advertising by candidates and their agents on the Internet. Rules on e-campaigning were issued in mid-October allowing candidates to campaign on the Internet, but prohibited publishing the results of election surveys during the election period and appealing for election funds. The regulations permit using pictures of the candidates and publishing their biographies and party manifestos.

Each candidate is permitted to have a representative at the polling and counting stations. For the GRCs, each team of candidates, or party slate, may have a representative at the counting station. Ballot boxes are opened in the presence of the candidates and their agents and the counting takes place in their presence. The polling stations in Singapore are generally orderly and quiet and few complaints are made regarding irregularities and misconduct.

The election results were reported at the same time at various assembly centers by the Election Department. Fourteen sites were designated as assembly centers.

¹⁰ The official campaign began on October 25, or Nomination Day. Nine days of campaigning is the minimum allowed under Singapore's law.

III. Political Parties and Political Competition

The PAP has been in office for over 40 years and shows no signs of losing its grip on power. As stated previously, even before the 2001 elections it was clear that the party would win at least 55 seats and therefore be guaranteed the ability to form the government for the ninth successive time. Because of the large number of uncontested seats, the only real question was the precise size of the PAP's electoral bloc.

Party Representation in Singapore Parliaments 1963 - 2001

Parliament	63-68	68-72	72-76	76-80	80-84	84-88	88-91	91-96	97-01	01-
Total Seats	51	58	65	69	75	79	81	81	83	84
PAP	37	58	65	69	75	77	80	77	81	82
Opposition	14	0	0	0	0	2	1	4	2	2

Source: *Straits Times*

The political system, as the above chart indicates, was more competitive in the immediate post-Federation period. The PAP, however, always has had an absolute majority in parliament.

All political parties in Singapore must register under the Societies Act. That law requires, under articles 4 and 24, that a political party must not be affiliated or connected with any foreign organization that is considered to be contrary to the national interest.

There are over 20 registered political parties in Singapore, although only a few are active between campaigns. In 1997, six parties competed in the parliamentary elections: the People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Worker's Party (WP), National Solidarity Party (NSP), Singapore's People's Party (SPP) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In 1991, the DPP did not contest, but the Singapore Justice Party (SJP) and Singapore Malay National Organization (*Pertubohan Kebangsaan Melaya Singapura* or PKMS) did slate candidates.

The political parties contesting the November 2001 elections in Singapore were as follows:

- Peoples Action Party (PAP)
- Workers Party (WP)
- Singapore Democratic Party (SDP)
- Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA)
- Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)

IV. Background to the 2001 Elections

A. The 1997 Elections

In Singapore's plurality, or first past the post, electoral system, the opposition's support by roughly one-third of the voters has never translated into more than four seats since the 1968 elections. In the 1997 election, the opposition won two, out of a total of 83, available seats. Prior to the general election, which took place on January 2, 1997, the opposition parties' contesting only 36 of the 83 seats predetermined the success of the PAP. Nevertheless, the PAP conducted a rigorous campaign in an effort to ensure that the party received two-thirds of the total votes cast, a margin regarded as sufficient endorsement of Prime Minister Goh and his administration.

The PAP secured a resounding victory, winning 65% of the votes and 81 seats. The remaining two seats were won by Chiam See Tong of the Singapore People's Party, (his fourth election victory, although previously he had served as a representative of the SDP); and Low Thia Kiang of the Workers' Party (his second win). The Workers' Party, the opposition party with the most votes, was allocated a non-constituency seat. The SDP lost the three seats it had previously held.

B. The PAP Government, Opposition Parties and Defamation Lawsuits

The use of defamation lawsuits has a long history in Singapore. Lee Kwan Yew states that he first filed a libel action against a political opponent in 1965, when Singapore was still part of the Malaysia Federation. Since then, such lawsuits have seemingly become a permanent feature of the political landscape¹¹. For Senior Minister Lee, the use of lawsuits is justified by the need for politicians, wrongfully accused of misconduct, to respond in a court of law so that the public can see that they are not fearful of standing up to cross-examination¹². The political opposition, however, views the use of such suits as a heavy-handed attempt to stifle criticism of the ruling party. They have also asserted that a compliant judiciary, which consistently rules in favor of the government, hears the lawsuits. These criticisms of the judiciary, too, have led to litigation.

Defamation lawsuits figured prominently in the 1997 elections and afterwards. Following the elections, for instance, Prime Minister Goh and 10 senior PAP members sued J.B. Jeyaretnam, the secretary general of the Workers Party (WP), and Tang Liang Hong, a WP politician, for defamation¹³. The two lawsuits followed remarks the opposition politicians made during the campaign. In September 1997, Jeyaretnam was ordered to pay damages of S\$20,000; the award was, however, only one-tenth of the amount sought by the PAP

¹¹ Defamation suits have sometimes been used by opposition political figures, but apparently with much less frequency.

¹² For Senior Minister Lee's views on the subject, see Lee Kwan Yew, *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (2000), pp 128-31.

¹³ Jeyaretnam had been sued in two previous campaigns, in 1976 and in 1988, for other remarks he had made about then Prime Minister Lee. *Ibid*, p.128.

leadership, and the judge, who criticized Goh's lawyers for their handling of the case, ordered that Jeyaretnam pay only 60% of the legal costs.

The Court of Appeal, however, dismissed an appeal by Jeyaretnam in July 1998, increasing the damages to S\$100,000, and awarding full costs against him. It was subsequently agreed, however, that Jeyaretnam would be permitted to pay the damages in five installments, thereby enabling him to avoid bankruptcy proceedings and to continue as a legislator.

On November 26, 1998 the Government revoked the remaining restrictions on the activities of the political activist Chia Thye Poh. He had been arrested in 1966, imprisoned for more than 22 years without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and confined for three more years to a fortress on the island of Sentosa, off the coast of Singapore for three more years. He was then permitted to reside in Singapore from 1992 onward, although prohibited from taking part in any political activity¹⁴.

Despite this concession to Chia, government repression of opposition politicians continued. In January 1999 Chee Soon Juan was charged twice under the Public Entertainment Act (PEA) for making unlicensed public speeches in December 1998 and January 1999. Chee had declined to apply for licenses to make the two public speeches, in which he criticized government policy, on the grounds that freedom of expression was guaranteed under the Constitution¹⁵.

Chee was found guilty in early February and was sentenced to seven days imprisonment because of his refusal to pay a fine of S \$1,400. Following his release, Chee appeared in court for a second time and was sentenced, along with the Assistant Secretary-General of the SDP, Wong Hong Toy (who had reportedly assisted Chee at the speech), to 12 days imprisonment. The sentence was a result of Chee's and Wong's refusal to pay fines of S \$2,500 and S \$2,400, respectively. The amount of the fines would have disqualified both men from seeking political office for five years; however, following an appeal, the fines were reduced to S \$1,900 each.¹⁶ This was below the level that would have rendered them ineligible to stand for election. The government responded to criticism that it had stifled political discourse by maintaining that opposition politicians had adequate opportunity to expound their views in Parliament or in the media (although in February 1998 the government had banned political parties from producing videos and from promoting their opinions on television).

In March, members of the PAP filed a petition to close the Workers' Party because of its inability to pay more than S \$280,000 in damages and costs awarded against it in a

¹⁴ The ISA's significance is primarily in its existence and the threat of its use, rather than its actual use. No one was detained under the ISA from 1989 through 1996 and it has been use very sparingly since then.

¹⁵ Singapore's constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press but permits official restrictions on the exercise of these rights.

¹⁶ Singapore's law provides that anyone who is convicted and sentenced in a court of law in Malaysia or Singapore to a term of imprisonment of one year or more, or fined S\$2,000 or more will not qualify to run for parliament unless pardoned by the president.

defamation case. The party's closure would force the resignation of its two parliamentary representatives. In April 1999, after serving his second term of imprisonment, Chee was fined S \$600 for illegally selling a book he had produced and published on Asian opposition leaders.

In May, it was reported that the party had lost an appeal against the award. On May 5, 2000, Jeyaretnam was declared bankrupt by the High Court after he failed to make payments on S \$30,000 in libel damages stemming from a lawsuit concerning an article that appeared in the Workers' Party newspaper, *The Hammer*, in 1995. Although, under Singaporean law, bankrupt individuals are excluded from practicing law and serving in Parliament, Jeyaretnam was permitted to attend the parliamentary session on May 9, pending an appeal against the ruling.

The opposition's fear of libel lawsuits is not only born of their experiences; it is also a result of what they have seen happen to others. In the past, for example, the government has lodged libel suits against foreign press agencies that have made comments critical of the government. In 1995, for instance, the *International Herald Tribune* was subject to a US\$675,000 judgment in a case brought by Senior Minister Lee, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Lee's son, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The *Tribune* had printed an article alleging that the younger Lee was appointed to his post because of his father's influence.¹⁷

V. The 2001 Electoral Campaign: Issues and Strategies

The election campaign was brief, lasting only nine days, the minimum under Singapore's law¹⁸. The election was called on October 16, Nomination Day was on October 25 (when the campaign officially begin) and the election was held on November 3, 2001.

The November 2001 elections in Singapore took place against the backdrop of an ever-worsening global economic crisis. The economic downturn was exacerbated by the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent recession affecting the US and Europe. Tourism, one of Singapore's main foreign exchange earners, was down significantly as travel from Europe and North America dwindled. Additionally, the demand for exports was significantly reduced. As a result, Singapore is experiencing its worst recession since independence. After growing by an average of 8.7% a year since 1965, the economy is set to shrink by 3% this year, according to the *Economist*. It is estimated that total lay-offs in 2001 may exceed 20,000 and next year between 15,000 and 20,000.

Because of the electorate's concern with declining economic conditions, the 9-day campaign focused on issues such as education, employment creation, job security, continued

¹⁷ The government can also punish international publications by restricting their circulation. Under amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, the weekly circulation of the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Asia Week* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* have been limited, although the circulation of *Asia Week* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* has been permitted to increase to a level that approximates actual demand.

¹⁸ Under Singapore's law, the campaign can last a minimum of nine days, a maximum of eight weeks.

economic growth other development issues. PAP candidates followed the lead of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew who said that the world is sailing into a major, unpredictable crisis. The PAP election effort understandably focused on Singapore's ability to continue to enjoy the high standard of living that its citizens have come to expect. The opposition employed a dual strategy by arguing that an opposition voice was needed and by challenging some of the government's key economic development policies.

A. The Uneven Playing Field

Opposition parties would have an uphill battle in Singapore under the best of conditions. The government, however, has left nothing to chance. The electoral playing field is tilted decidedly in its favor.

The following are some of the ways that the government has helped to ensure favorable election outcomes:

- The government controls the election machinery, determining the timing of elections and setting district boundaries; candidates, especially opposition candidates, might not know until the last minute where they will be campaigning;
- The government allocates broadcast time to parties in proportion to the number of candidates that they have fielded; Singapore's opposition parties have difficulty in recruiting candidates, in part because of the repressive political environment and legal obstacles that they confront;
- Each candidate is required to make a US\$7,200 deposit, an increase over past years,¹⁹ and a large sum for cash strapped opposition parties;
- The expansion in the number of members elected from group representation constituencies works in the government's favor; the opposition parties who have difficulty recruiting candidates in any case, have an especially difficult time filling multimember candidate lists, particularly when one member on the list has to be an ethnic minority.

The government also has a full arsenal of laws and practices that pose further obstacles to the opposition and critics of the government. These include:

- Defamation lawsuits;²⁰ as previously mentioned, have had the effect of intimidating, and, at times, humiliating, opposition political figures and government critics.
- The Internal Security Act (ISA) allows the government to prohibit or restrict publications that incite violence, urge violations of the law, that arouse tensions among religious, ethnic or linguistic groups or which threaten national security or public order.
- Under the Public Entertainment Act (PEA),²¹ permission is required before any public speech may be delivered; thus persons wishing to speak at any public meeting, except one sponsored by the government, must obtain a public entertainment license from the police.

¹⁹ As stated earlier, the deposit is pegged at 8% of an MP's salary, rounded to the nearest \$500 during the previous year.

²⁰ As mentioned earlier, defamation suits have also been used by the opposition, but with much less frequency and success.

²¹ The PEA was used in the 1997 elections as the basis for prosecuting opposition leader Chee Soon Juan.

- Public meetings of more than five persons, including political meetings, require a police permit.
- The Societies Act requires that most organizations with 10 or more members register with the government; the Act prohibits political activities by organizations other than political parties; thus, professional organizations, such as the bar association, are precluded from commenting on matters that may be deemed “political”.
- The Undesirable Publications Act (UPA), although used primarily to restrict the availability of sexually oriented materials, can also be used for political purposes; for example, it allows the government broad discretion in banning written materials that threaten the stability of the state, are pro-communist or incite religious, ethnic or linguistic animosities;²² in 1998 The UPA was amended to include compact discs, sound recordings, pictures and computer generated drawings.
- The government strongly influences the print and electronic media through Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. (SPH), a private holding company with close ties to the government. SPH owns all general circulation newspapers published in the four official languages; The government must approve and can remove holders of SPH management shares, who in turn have the power to appoint and dismiss directors and staff; not surprisingly, newspaper coverage of political matters closely reflects the government’s views.²³
- The Political Donations Act prohibits political associations from receiving foreign donations; permissible donors are confined to Singaporean citizens who are at least 21 years of age, and Singapore-controlled companies; the Act also imposes reporting requirements on those who have made donations totaling more than \$10,000 in any single year.

The laws and practices identified above have the net effect of limiting political discourse and sharply curtailing the ability of opposition parties to recruit and mobilize supporters. As a result, Singapore’s electoral process falls considerably short of meeting international standards for fair elections.

After the 2001 elections, Senior Minister Lee seemed to at least tacitly acknowledge that elections in Singapore would not be found to be acceptable in mature democracies, such as the UK when he stated that Westminster rules were not appropriate for Singapore.²⁴ On the other hand, Prime Minister Goh seemed to reject the assertion that the playing field was tilted. Instead, he ascribed the PAP’s victory to the party’s efficiency and strength. Goh stated that the playing field did not appear level “...because the other side is so weak. We run the system too efficiently. There’s very little room for them to grow. It’s just a fact”²⁵

²² The Films Act and ISA have similar provisions.

²³ Some commentary critical of government policies does appear, primarily in “opinion pieces” by well-known columnists and in letters to newspapers such as the *Straits Times*.

²⁴ As quoted in *The International Herald Tribune (IHT)*. See, Michael Richardson, Singaporean Leaders Dismiss Reform Calls: Proposed electoral changes Are Rejected, *IHT*, Nov. 13, 2001, p.6.

²⁵ As quoted in *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, Barry Wain, “In Singapore, Opposition is Scarce”, Nov. 2-4, p.4; Also see Richard Borsuk, “Goh Defends Measures That Favor His Party”, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 2-4, p.4.

B. The Ruling Party's Campaign

The ruling party's central message to voters was clear: only the PAP can bring the country out of economic recession. In addition, The PAP urged voters to cast their ballots for the candidates and parties they think will best serve their interests.

Perhaps the most controversial tactic used by the PAP was the practice of offering benefits, such as upgraded housing, to constituencies that supported the PAP, and threatening a loss of benefits to those that did not. The tactic was especially persuasive since approximately 85% of all Singaporeans live in public housing. The same ploy has been used in past elections and has been strongly defended by Senior Minister Lee,²⁶ as well as by Prime Minister Goh. The Prime Minister, responding to criticism of this practice, said, "how can I get the support of my fellow MPs. If I give the opposition MPs priority over them there will be a rebellion in my party."²⁷

Throughout the campaign, PAP candidates stayed "on message". The ruling party also took advantage of its extensive coverage in the media to frame the debate on a range of other issues. The government took the lead in warning candidates against inciting racial emotions and stressed the need for ethnic harmony. At the same time, the PAP attempted to appeal to various ethnic communities on the basis that they would reap material rewards if the PAP candidates were elected from their area.

The PAP, often using Ministers as spokesmen, also emphasized the party's ability to provide benefits to constituents and communities. In Nee Soon Central, the home of many Malay voters, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean, for instance, spoke in Malay noting that the PAP incumbent, Ong Ah Heng, had provided more kindergarten classes and educational grants (bursaries) for the area. Similarly, in Hougang, Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo stressed that the PAP could provide covered walkways so that the area's residents would not get wet on the way to the market.

Finally, the PAP challenged the SDP's leader, Chee Soon Juan, by initiating a defamation suit for remarks he made during the short campaign. Chee's remarks, asking the Prime Minister to explain a loan ostensibly made to the Indonesian government during the Suharto era, drew widespread attention by the news media. The government, clearly concerned about the public's reaction to Chee's questioning, pursued the matter aggressively, maintaining that the loan at issue was never disbursed.²⁸

²⁶ For example, Senior Minister Lee writes in his memoirs that, in 1997, the PAP had countered the opposition's "by-election" strategy "...with the electoral carrot that priority for upgraded housing in a constituency would be in accord with the strength of voter support for the PAP in that constituency". He stated, "This was criticized by American liberals as unfair, as if pork barrel politics did not exist elsewhere." Lee Kwan Yew, *From Third World to First* (2000), p.133.

²⁷ As quoted in *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 2-4, 2001, p.4.

²⁸ This incident is discussed further, *infra*.

C. The Opposition's Campaign

As in past elections, the opposition parties followed what has been termed their “by-election strategy.” Since the 1991 elections, the opposition has reasoned that voters did not want the PAP defeated; however, they did want the opposition represented in parliament. The opposition, therefore, would contest for less than one-half of the parliamentary seats to ensure a PAP victory. In this way, voters could feel comfortable voting for the opposition, knowing that the government would continue to be in the hands of the PAP.

Campaigning by the opposition political parties centered around the theme that it is time to break the PAP's stranglehold on parliament. Generally, the opposition tried to convince the public that without them the ruling party could make arbitrary changes, such as giving ministers large salary increases and introducing unpopular taxes which might exacerbate the hardship of the people already facing their worst recession in years.

Additionally, the opposition took every opportunity to remind the voters of what they saw as an uneven playing field and an unfair electoral process. Several opposition leaders also criticized the government for giving out benefits such as the “New Singapore Shares” (in effect a government bond available to the poor and elderly) to lure voters²⁹.

The WP had expected to make a strong showing in the Nee Soo East single member constituency because of disputes between community leaders and the government. Because of this, the Senior Minister Lee reportedly intervened and met privately with leaders of the temples. In addition, the Senior Minister expressed displeasure at what he saw as an appeal to “language chauvinism.” He was quoted as saying that he was disappointed with the WP for allowing rally speakers to exploit the dialect issue. The Senior Minister apparently was concerned about a PAP candidate's inability to speak Hokkien. The WP leader, on the other hand, once addressed a rally in the constituency for one-half hour speaking in the indigenous language.

Chiam See Tong, the SDA leader, claimed that total darkness would descend on Singapore if the ruling party were to obtain a clean sweep of at the polls. He said that the ruling party had become increasingly desperate because Singaporeans were waking up and no longer wanted to vote blindly for the ruling party. The SDA approach focused its effort on convincing voters that the PAP could not win based on its performance as the governing party and was therefore resorting to material incentives to obtain votes. The party's central message was that a stronger opposition in parliament would be able to check and balance the government and ensure transparency and accountability. SDA leaders and candidates attacked the “carrot and stick” approach of the ruling party. One SDA candidate was quoted as asking, “how can they say ‘you are not voting for PAP, therefore, I am not building a hospital for you,’ or if you are not supporting PAP and your house catches fire, ‘I'm not sending the fire engine.’”

²⁹ Some of these bonds, reportedly, could be redeemed the day before the poll.

The SDP's platform emphasized the party's economic proposals. These included state funded entitlements, minimum wage legislation and a "Singapore First," policy on hiring. The latter proposal led to a controversy regarding the country's many foreign workers. The SDP's challenge in Jurong GRC was thought to be particularly troublesome for the ruling party. The SDP's positions on the issues mentioned above were thought to strongly appeal to citizens in the mainly working and lower middle class area. The SDP, however, did not have a chance to vigorously campaign in the area and may have been unable to connect with the everyday problems of the voters. The PAP candidates, on the other hand, promised adequate childcare and expanded care for the aging. In a working class area where both parents normally work and care for elderly relatives, the message of the PAP resonated with the electorate.

D. The Allegation and the Apology

What seemed to grab the public's attention in the final hours of the campaign, however, was not economic policy or housing, but Dr. Chee's allegation that the PAP government had made a loan to the Indonesian government, under President Suharto. President Suharto was widely known for running a corrupt regime, and when the alleged loan would have been made, Indonesia's economy was in a tailspin (as it turned out, the government had, in fact, offered to participate in a loan package but Indonesia failed to fulfill conditions for the loan and the money was never disbursed).

"Mr. Goh! Mr. Goh! Come here, Mr. Goh! I want to talk with you, come here! Where is our money, Mr. Goh? You can run, but can't hide". Dr. Chee's taunting of the Prime Minister during a walkabout at the hawker center market on Sunday, October 28 would become perhaps the most enduring image associated with the 2001 elections campaign. The dramatic pictures of Chee, repeating his challenge, following the Prime Minister from one location to another, appeared as the lead story on a number of evening news shows.

At a rally the same Sunday night, candidates for Jurong GRC and Hong Kah GRC were primed to continue this line of attack -- to demand that the PM and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew account for the \$17 billion loan offer to Indonesia.

The government responded by saying that Dr. Chee should apologize because he knows that Singapore did not actually provide any funds to Suharto. While an offer for a loan was made, the loan never actually materialized. Dr. Chee initially refused to retreat from his accusations but later apologized, saying, "if something I said offended anyone I am sorry." Nevertheless, the ruling party demanded a written apology and damages. The SDP leader was soon served with two letters of demand from the Prime Minister's lawyers and asked to read out, at a rally, an apology the lawyers had prepared. He was told that if he failed to do so, legal action would commence.

To get his campaign back on track, Dr. Chee apologized to the Prime Minister at a press conference and later at a rally. But the Prime Minister dismissed the apology as inadequate, noting that Dr. Chee had not admitted that his allegations were false. Dr. Chee apologized once again at a rally. Reading from a prepared text, he sighed and bowed his head.

According to *the Straits Times*, the fallout from the confrontation at the hawker center market created fear, frustration and an unexpected backlash even among some SDP supporters. Some party leaders even believed that the incident hurt the party's chances in the Jurong GRC, where it was running a strong campaign.

A short time after the election, a suit for defamation was filed against Chee. He now faces the prospect of bankruptcy.

E. The Media and Coverage of the Campaign

The government heavily influences print and broadcast media in Singapore³⁰. The government-linked holding company, Singapore International Media Pte. Ltd., for instance, has a near monopoly on broadcasting. Subsidiaries of the company operate four television channels and 10 of 15 radio stations.³¹ The Singapore Press Holdings Company, also with strong government ties, owns all general circulation newspapers.³²

As stated earlier, the electronic media is required to provide political parties with broadcast time during the campaign in proportion to the number of candidates they have slated. Typically, this has meant that the PAP receives well over three times as many minutes of broadcast time than any other party.³³

The electronic and print media provided extensive information regarding where to vote, how the voting process would proceed and how the votes would be tallied. By all accounts, there was rather elaborate coverage of the electoral administrative process. However, accusations of unfair media coverage were rampant in all opposition party camps.

The front page of the November 3, 2001 *Straits-Time* read in bold print, "PAP seeks decisive mandate." Just beneath that was a rather large action shot picture of the Prime Minister and the caption next to the pictures says, "We'll see this through. The more you vote for your government the more secure your future." At the very top of the page, although in smaller print, is an announcement that read "Delay in retrenchments: After NTUC appeal, UOB will consider deferring lay-offs." On the same page but at the lower bottom, right corner is a discussion of the opposition parties' hopes for the election outcome. There is no picture accompanying the article. What a Prime Minister says, of course, is important news in any society. Nevertheless, this picture and caption appearing on the day of the election could reasonably be interpreted as an attempt by the government-influenced media to sway undecided voters.

³⁰ For a discussion of the government's role in regulating the media, see US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999: Singapore* (February 2000).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* SPH has a category of shares, which has more management rights than other shares, and only nominees of the Ministry of Information and the Arts can own these. The relationship between the government and the media is also discussed in Ooi Can Seng, "Singapore", in *Political Party Systems and Democratic Development in East and Southeast Asia*, Vol.I, (edited by Wolfgang Sachsenroder and Ulrike E. Frings, 1998), pp.343-402.

³³ In 1997, for example, the PAP had 12 minutes per program, the SDP and WP had 3.5 minutes and NSP had 2.5 minutes. Two programs were broadcast in all four of the official languages. *Ibid.*, p.381.

The Senior Minister, in responding to criticisms of the media, said that the election was not about Singapore Democratic Party leader, Chee Soon Juan, but about the economy and jobs. When questioned about fair electoral coverage and press freedom in Singapore by a *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) reporter, the Senior Minister was quoted as having said, “I believe we’ve got a responsible press. They are not ashamed of what they are doing... Please remember we’re not kindergarten pupils.”

F. The Election Results

The electoral results amounted to a landslide victory for the PAP. The ruling party increased its majority in Parliament to 82 out of 84 seats. It received 75.3 % of all valid votes cast in the seat contested, a 10 percent rise from 65 % in the 1997 elections.³⁴

The November 2001 Election Results

Political Party	Seats in 1997	Seats Contested	Share of valid votes in districts	Seats won	MPs Unopposed	Seats in 2001
PAP	81	29	75.3 %	27	55	82
WP	1	2	39.3 %	1	0	1
SDA	1	13	27.6 %	1	0	1
SDP	0	11	20.4 %	0	0	0
DPP	0	2	14.3 %	0	0	0
Independent	0	2	9.9%	0	0	0

The results in the four contested GRCs, indicated in the table below, reflect a similar pattern. They also reveal sizeable opposition support that is not reflected in the seat allocation.

November 2001 Electoral Results from Contested GRCs

GRC	Party	Votes	% Share	Party	Votes	% Share	Votes	% Difference
Hong Kah	PAP	96,450	79.7	SDP	24,513	20.3	71,937	59.5
Jurong	PAP	84,742	79.8	SDP	21,511	20.2	63,231	59.5
Jalan Besar	PAP	68,309	74.5	SDA	23,391	25.3	44,918	49.0
Tampines	PAP	85,915	73.3	SDA	31,231	26.7	54,684	46.7

Source: *Straits-Time*

The two opposition members to win seats did so in single member constituencies. The outcomes of the elections in Singapore’s nine single member constituencies are contained in Appendix A.

VI. The Post-Election Period

In the immediate post-election period, the government’s attention has been focused on addressing the global economic downturn, its impact on the Singapore economy and the long

³⁴ As stated previously, care should be taken in interpreting these statistics, since different constituencies were contested in 1997 and 2001.

term implication of a prolonged economic downturn in the United States and Europe as a result of the September 11th terrorist attacks and subsequent war effort in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister represented Singapore at the ASEAN annual meeting and the economic team was beginning to outline strategic role for Singapore in the proposed greater free trade area between ASEAN and China.

Also, in an effort to respond to criticism regarding the lack of an effective opposition in the legislature and the dangers that this may pose for the democratic process in Singapore, the PAP proposed establishing an alternative policy group within the Parliament. The new group, referred to as the People's Action Forum (PAF) would, according to the Prime Minister, be composed of 20 PAP MPs who would be freed from the whip to vote and speak their minds and challenge government policies in Parliament. According to Prime Minister Goh, the Institute of Policy Studies, a research organization, would assist the new group.

The PAP's proposal was contrary to recommendations made by three leaders of the Roundtable, a local policy discussion group. One week after the election, the group proposed, in a letter to the *Straits Times*, more far reaching political reforms. Lam Peng Er, Harish Pillay and Chandra Mohan Nair, members of the Roundtable's executive committee, suggested that the government adopt reforms such as establishing an independent election commission to draft constituency boundaries; introducing more single member constituencies; and raising the minimum number of campaign days from nine to 15.³⁵ The Roundtable leaders said, "Intense competition is a hallmark of Singaporean life...yet the one institution not subject to any serious competition is the PAP."

Thus far, the government has rejected pleas for reform, and, instead, is adhering to its plan to create an artificial opposition within parliament. In response to the Roundtable proposal, Senior Minister Lee said, "If you have plain straight forward Westminster rules...it would never had worked. You would never have had the self-renewal and a series of good people getting into the government and working Singapore up the ladder."

VII. Conclusion

The PAP government has done much to improve the lives of Singaporeans. The city is safe, clean and orderly. Its citizens are healthy, prosperous, technologically sophisticated, well housed and well educated. Yet its political institutions are considered by many to be paternalistic and authoritarian, providing Singaporeans with few opportunities to participate effectively in the nation's public life. Whether Singaporeans want a change in government, or would like the current government to revise its policies, is uncertain. Until opposition parties are permitted to compete fairly for public office and citizens can readily obtain information about potential political choices, no one will know for sure.

³⁵ The Roundtable proposal is outlined in the *International Herald Tribune*, Michael Richardson, "Singapore's Leaders Dismiss Reform Calls", Nov. 13, 2001, p.6.

Senior Minister Lee has been a strong and articulate advocate of the “Asian Way” in the global debate over democracy and human rights. Resisting political liberalization, he has argued that western notions of democracy, and political liberty, when applied to Singapore and other Asian countries, were a destabilizing force that threatened to upset a social balance that relied on consensus and respect for authority. His rejection of universal democratic principles is firm and unapologetic.

That vision is not shared by a growing number of countries in East Asia, such as Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand have liberalized their political systems as well as their economies. They have recognized that a competitive political system promotes human rights and helps sustain economic growth.

The examples of East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan also challenge the Singapore government’s contention that continued prosperity relies on limited political freedom. Democratic developments in Taiwan, as well as Hong Kong’s growing democratization movement, also challenge the assertion that Confucian or Chinese values are necessarily incompatible with competitive elections and opposition parties.³⁶

The Singapore government’s vision is also not shared by the nation’s democracy activists. They have paid a high price for the government’s policies, a price that has included imprisonment, harassment by lawsuits and other forms of government retaliation for their expressions of dissent.

Whether Singapore’s “Asian Way” approach to political development will continue to appeal to the nation’s growing middle class is uncertain. Globalization, the need for an educational system that allows people to think critically rather than to conform, and addressing the problems posed by a declining economy will all help shape coming events. These are forces that seem likely to expose Singapore to more external influences in shaping the nation’s political future.

³⁶ Commenting on the relative durability of authoritarian and democratic political structures, Samuel Huntington notes, “The freedom and creativity that President Lee has introduced in Taiwan will survive him. The honesty and efficiency that Senior Minister Lee has brought to Singapore are likely to follow him to his grave.” Samuel Huntington, “Democracy for the Long Haul”, in *Consolidating Third World Democracies*, (edited by L. Diamond, M. Plattner, Yunhan Chu and Hung-mao Tien, 1997), p.13.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Winners and Losers in the Nine Single Member Constituencies

Constituency	Winner			Loser			Margin	
	Party	Votes	% Share	Party	Votes	% Share	Votes	% Share
Ayer Rajah	PAP	15,024	88	DPP	2,057	12.0	12,967	76.0
MacPherson	PAP	16,870	83.7	DPP	3,227	16.3	13,593	67.5
Joo Chiat	PAP	15,426	83.5	IND	3,038	16.5	12,388	67.1
Bukit Timah	PAP	19,121	77.4	SDA	4,376	17.7	14,745	59.7
Nee Soon Central	PAP	16,755	78.5	SDP	4,583	21.5	12,172	57.0
Nee Soon East	PAP	19,566	73.7	WP	6,990	26.3	12,576	47.4
Chua Chu Kong	PAP	15,349	65.3	SDA	8,143	34.7	7,206	30.7
Hougang	WP	12,070	55.0	PAP	9,882	45.0	2,188	10.0
Potong Pasir	SDA	8,107	52.4	PAP	7,356	47.6	751	4.9

Source: *Straits Times*

Appendix B

Contested Seats won by Political Parties Competing in the Elections

November 3, 2001

Party	Candidates in Contested Seats	% Valid Votes in Contested Wards	Number of Seats Won
PAP	29	75.3 %	27
WP	2	39.3 %	1
SDA	13	27.6 %	1
SDP	11	20.4 %	0
DPP	2	14.3 %	0
IND	2	9.9 %	0