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Elite cohesion

The Lee family feud tested Singapore's unique establishment unity.

For decades, observers have entertained the possibility that Singapore's dominant-party system would end with a split in the People's Action Party. Pundits said the chances of PAP factionalism would grow when Lee Kuan Yew left the scene. But nobody predicted that the split would occur within his family. Lee Wei Ling and Lee Hsien Yang stunned Singaporeans when they accused their older brother, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, of abusing his position and being unfit for office.

At a human level, we were simultaneously repulsed and captivated by the sight of our aristocracy behaving like mere mortals. There was the patriarch's uncontrollable tomboy daughter with no patience for protocol. The powerful daughter-in-law raising a furry middle finger. The eldest son who hosted a big Chinese New Year reunion and didn't call his siblings. The affair contained the simmering old grudges of a long-running soap opera, and the flashes of pettiness of a reality TV show.

From a political perspective, however, the more important question was what all this meant at a structural level. Lee Wei Ling

and Lee Hsien Yang, aside from being Lee Kuan Yew's offspring, were members of Singapore's establishment: she had been the head of a major public sector medical centre; he, an armed forces brigadier-general and chief executive of Singapore's largest government-linked company. In the Singapore ecosystem, such creatures don't go rogue.

Elite dynamics matter in every country's politics, even in the age of so-called people power. When the people rise up, what happens next depends on the response of elites—party bosses, local governors, military generals, business moguls and union bosses, ayatollahs and bishops. Elites control the networks and resources that revolutionaries and reformists need for the long haul. The masses may fill the streets, but it's elites who, behind closed doors, urge a president or prime minister to stay or go, depending on which scenario serves their own interests best.

When the establishment is highly competitive, there'll always be challengers within who'll try to take advantage when the leader is under pressure. But when elites are cohesive, they will support one another through a crisis. A certain amount of elite solidarity is essential for political stability and getting things done for the country. Too much of it, though, can result in rigidity; the political system can become an instrument of elites' narrow interests, insensitive to the needs of ordinary citizens.

For both good and ill, Singapore's establishment has been extremely close-knit, even compared with quite authoritarian regimes. Malaysia, which like Singapore has been ruled by the same party since independence, has a ruling elite riven with factionalism and intrigue. The Chinese Communist Party regime has much more infighting than the PAP-led establishment. In Singapore since independence, there's been no tradition of challenging an anointed prime minister for his job. No retired minister or top civil servant has published a tell-all memoir. No leaks emanate from inter-departmental rivalries, to boost one agency's standing over another's.

There have been hints that Singapore may become more normal.

A handful of former government people have joined the opposition. This was a trail blazed by Francis Seow, who briefly held the position of solicitor general and came close to winning a Group Representation Constituency seat in 1988. In recent elections, the highest-ranking defector has been Tan Jee Say, former principal private secretary to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Another defector is Workers' Party parliamentarian Leon Perera, a former Economic Development Board officer, indicating that some of Singapore's most able and principled individuals may reject the establishment for the more uncertain path of the opposition cause.

The highest-level defection to the ranks of dissenters was Devan Nair, the republic's president from 1981–85. After his resignation, he wrote scathing critiques of Lee Kuan Yew for installing one-man rule. Since it became a directly elected position, the presidency has become a bit of a wild card. In 1999, President Ong Teng Cheong called an unprecedented press conference behind the government's back. Ong calmly accused his former cabinet colleagues and the civil service of not cooperating with him. Tan Cheng Bock is the latest irritant. A former member of the PAP's central executive committee, he wouldn't accept that cabinet had the final word on who should be the establishment's preferred presidential candidate.

There have also been a handful of high-level public servants whose criticisms have been too pungent for their political masters' tastes. Ngiam Tong Dow, one of the top technocrats managing economic and finance portfolios until his retirement in 1999, later became a vocal critic of what he saw as a growing disconnect between PAP governance and realities on the ground. Senior diplomat Tommy Koh never waited for retirement to give voice to his conscience on issues such as disability rights and artistic freedom.

Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School, has criticised Singapore's foreign policy for not responding sensitively enough to new realities. Yeoh Lam Keong, former chief economist for the Government Investment Corporation, has (together with Donald Low, former director of strategic policy at the Public Service

Division) critiqued Singapore's neoliberal social and economic policies and pushed for a more compassionate and sustainable approach to government.

Each time an establishment-type criticises the government, the occasion is greeted with great fanfare by Singaporeans longing to see the PAP taken down a notch. Socio-political sites and Facebook go gaga. Sometimes they get carried away by the fantasy, like when netizens gleefully circulated a petition signed by Lee Wei Ling, expressing support for opposition leader Chee Soon Juan—only to have the real Lee Wei Ling come out to say she never signed it and proceed to prove that she was still a Lee progeny by dissing Chee as “slippery” and unfit for parliament.

Clearly, the vast majority of individuals we may think of as establishment rebels are not revolutionaries. Their words may rock the boat, but they are not calling for a mutiny to throw the captain overboard. Indeed, when we look at the pattern of establishment dissent since the 1990s, it's striking that betrayal is largely in the eyes of the beholder—namely, of the PAP leadership. When the government gets worked up by its own elites, it's not because those individuals are plotting the leaders' downfall or planning to defect to the opposition, but because the government is hypersensitive to criticism and paranoid about potential threats.

Devan Nair certainly would not have left the fold if Lee Kuan Yew hadn't punted him out so cruelly. By Nair's own admission, it took a full-blown character assassination of him and his loved ones before he recovered from his blind faith in Lee. Similarly, Tan Cheng Bock, the establishment's latest bete noir, didn't start out wanting to be on the “other” side. He ended up there because his own side rejected him as the government-endorsed presidential candidate. Fielding Tan Cheng Bock would have won more political points for the PAP than backing Tony Tan. But the PAP leadership has a habit of confusing gift horses with Trojan horses. Similarly, there's no indication that the top bureaucrats and diplomats who've made frank comments were setting out to destabilise the status quo. The government could have chosen to welcome them as proof of the

PAP's Broad Church ideology. Instead, the internal critics had to face stinging rebukes and loss of rank in the PAP nomenklatura.



Singapore's elite cohesion is an accomplishment that hasn't been given much attention, considering how exceptional it is. To give the PAP due credit, one big reason is the party's success in aligning itself with Singapore's national interests. As a result, many elites are loyal to the system because they sincerely see it as the only way to keep their country going. Another major factor is Singapore's size. It is too small to require decentralisation of authority and resources to provincial or state-level governments, which could become political bases for would-be challengers. Instead, everything can be run from an all-powerful centre.

In addition, though, Lee Kuan Yew erected a formidable array of structural barriers to keep the establishment in check. Learning from his battle with Lim Chin Siong and the radical left, Lee rewrote the party constitution, installing a phalanx of cadres that made an essentially self-selected central executive committee impervious to challengers from within the party. Furthermore, if a faction of frustrated PAP parliamentarians emerged, they would have to sacrifice their seats if they wanted to break away and form a Barisan Sosialis 2.0. This is because Lee amended the republic's Constitution such that an MP will lose his seat if he's no longer a member of the political party for which he stood in the election. If the leaders think one of their own is plotting something, they can pre-emptively expel him from the party, thus triggering his eviction from parliament.

Outside of the party, it is equally difficult for establishment members to stray. Leaks are a key means through which people within any political system compete. In Singapore in 1994, a civil servant was convicted under the Official Secrets Act along with a few individuals from the private sector for a harmless premature release of economic data. There were obviously no hard

feelings—the bureaucrat’s name was Tharman Shanmugaratnam and the conviction didn’t exactly hurt his career—but the government pursued the case doggedly to signal to the entire public sector that it had zero tolerance for leaks. The message seems to have been heard loud and clear.

Then there are the golden handcuffs. Administrative Service remuneration is matched by few private sector employers. Furthermore, most big private sector organisations need to maintain good relations with the government and would not want to be seen as harbouring an enemy of the state. On the flip side, loyalty is rewarded even beyond retirement, with a buffet of sinecures on offer in government-linked companies.

Most countries have multiple power centres where potential competitors can emerge. In weak democracies, the military is the most important of such bases. In Singapore, the armed forces are a key training ground for future politicians, but no officer could ever elevate himself against cabinet’s wishes. Singapore Armed Forces chiefs are rotated every couple of years and retired in their prime; they never stay long enough to cultivate an autonomous power base. When scholar-officers leave the SAF at age 50 or younger, the government doesn’t require them to fend for themselves and thus get into mischief. They are transplanted into ministries and government-linked companies, keeping them safely within the family.

It’s not just material benefits that defectors would lose. In any country, the establishment is also held together by social glue. Everybody needs to belong, and if your sense of belonging has been tied to Singapore’s power elite, being banished may be hard to take. Many people couldn’t understand why Lee Hsien Yang said he felt he had to go into exile. Those of us outside the establishment take it for granted that some of our activities are under surveillance; that our innocent words and actions may be used against us; that some of our acquaintances will shun us because they fear being tainted by associating with us; that media will interview us but not quote us; and organisations will invite us and then disinvite us. We are used

to being in the doghouse, and find it quite comfy—not least because that’s where some of Singapore’s most fun and interesting political pariahs seem to hang out. But imagine how different it must be for Singaporeans who’ve always strode the stately halls of power, or even just its outer corridors. It would take an extremely self-possessed individual not to care that he’s suddenly become persona non grata.

The Lee family feud was sensational, but also contained aspects that were in keeping with the character of Singapore politics. Maybe we should have even seen it coming: that the only establishment members who would have the guts to stand up to a Lee would be other Lees. More importantly, though, like all previous schisms, this one didn’t precipitate an actual leadership challenge. Lee Hsien Loong’s personal reputation may have been somewhat bruised, but his two siblings showed no desire to rally supporters around them or encourage a new leader to emerge. Neither had ever shown any inclination to get involved in their father’s vocation, and that wasn’t about to change. So far, the controversy has only underlined the PAP’s resilience.

Singapore’s elite solidarity has its benefits. For example, looking at how many democracies have been derailed by the military, it’s a very good thing that the SAF has always been under tight civilian control. Overall, the absence of infighting has been a key part of Singapore’s success story. But, ironically, it could also be the country’s undoing, by starving it of the intellectual ferment it needs to continue prospering. In a 1964 essay marking the 10th anniversary of the PAP, founding father Goh Keng Swee noted the importance of an “informed and articulate” power elite comprising “civil servants, the professionals, business leaders, trade union leaders, writers, the church, the universities, and so on”. It was vital that this establishment transcend political affiliations and resist political polarisation. Through vigorous and on-going debate and discussion, they would serve as “an effective and intelligent non-party leadership of public opinion”, giving society “ballast, continuity and purpose” in a crisis.

Somewhere along the line, though, the PAP has come to view the establishment in more partisan terms. Refusing to profess loyalty to the leadership is equated with disloyalty to Singapore. This attitude is likely to set a vicious cycle in motion. As the government gets less and less accustomed to vigorous debate, its tolerance for alternative views will progressively diminish. Then, like a child who is so used to getting his way that he throws a tantrum when his devoted parents bring home chocolate ice cream instead of chocolate chip, the government will overreact to even mildly deviant ideas from its own side. Should the government show itself emotionally unprepared for naysayers even within its establishment, that would be an unintended but predictable consequence of decades of elite cohesion.