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Demophobic society

Singapore's allergy to the D-word weakens us.

The strangest exchange I've had with the Singapore government occurred early in my second career as an academic. *The Straits Times* had just published my op-ed piece trying to explain the rationale behind opposition politician Chee Soon Juan's civil disobedience campaign. In reply, the Prime Minister's Office questioned whether I was being non-partisan, and basically accused me of using my academic position to disguise myself as a dispassionate observer.

With the glee of Hercule Poirot delivering his coup de grace, the PMO's letter brandished a few lines from the 8,000-word academic paper on which my *ST* article was based—lines, it said, that revealed my “true intention”. What did its forensics expose? That I wanted to subvert an elected government, perhaps? Not quite. The supposedly self-incriminating lines showed—voilà!—that I was in favour of democracy for Singapore.

Let's consider the irony here. Singapore is not China, where being pro-democracy means you're against the Constitution. The five gold stars on China's national flag represent communism (the big star, naturally) and the social classes of the people (the four small ones).

In contrast, the five white stars on Singapore's flag represent the nation's core principles—one of which is democracy. Every school day, children stand before the flag and promise, hand on heart, "to build a democratic society". I was basically being accused of trying to fulfil our national pledge.

Regulators have gone to the extent of labelling local plays dealing with socio-political issues as "Mature Content", a tag normally reserved for sex and violence (Chapter 8). The irony of the government's demophobia goes deeper. The People's Action Party has been a major beneficiary of democracy. Lee Kuan Yew didn't have to go to war to come to power, like George Washington or Mao Zedong did. Our nationalists succeeded by arming the people with the franchise, not firearms; targeting polling stations, not enemy brigades; and counting ballots, not bodies. Thanks to democracy, no PAP leader had to lose his life to win the right to rule.

Many popularly elected regimes later became so unpopular that they could only stay in power by abandoning any pretence of democracy. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and the Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos come to mind. Singapore does not belong in that category either. The PAP's electoral victories in recent decades have been reflective of genuine popular support. I've not seen any opinion poll, from any source, that shows approval ratings for the government lower than the PAP's share of the popular vote, which would be the case if elections were rigged. Even American diplomats in a confidential 2004 briefing note published by Wikileaks did not attribute PAP dominance mainly to dirty tricks: "The biggest challenge to the development of the opposition in Singapore is the PAP's highly successful track record. It has consistently delivered peace, stability, and rapid economic growth for four decades while avoiding corruption and mainly avoiding cronyism."

Star students tend not to knock the education system that allowed them to shine. So why does a straight-A political party keep badmouthing democracy? Democratisation wouldn't be fatal for PAP rule as such. But it would cramp the PAP's preferred style of

government. It wants maximum room to exercise discretionary power, with as few checks and balances as it can get away with. In the government's eyes, democracy looks like the ungainly, hip-swaying Olympic sport of racewalking, with esoteric rules making it unnecessarily hard to progress from point A to point B, and which is treated seriously only because it came from the West and everyone's too politically correct to say, enough already.

Democracy is about popular sovereignty, giving all adults equal rights to pick the people who get to wield state power. Lee Kuan Yew voiced misgivings about even this basic principle. Clearly, not everyone can be trusted to act for the common good, or even to make intelligent choices in their own self-interest. But the democratic principle of one person one vote has never been based on the fiction of uniform ability. When the American founding fathers declared as a self-evident truth that everyone is "created" equal, they meant just that: people enter the world equally endowed with certain basic rights. It is a moral statement, distinguishing democracy from systems that treat some groups as rulers by birthright while others as destined to be ruled. No democrat claims adults are equally capable of making wise decisions in the public interest—this is just one of many myths that democracy's opponents construct to make this form of government seem as absurd a sport as racewalking. Nor do democrats claim that the system always hands power to the most able or honest leaders. (Donald Trump. Enough said.)

What makes democracy the best political system ever devised is not that voters unfailingly choose good governments but that it gives people a peaceful way to kick out bad ones. This is nothing short of miraculous considering that, through much of human history, most people lived and died under yokes of oppression they were powerless to break. Democracy enables peaceful turnovers of power because of the moral legitimacy that has come to be attached to the vote. Citizens are not equal in reality, but it's because a clean election gives equal weight to everyone's vote that voters peacefully accept the result, even when they are on the losing side.

Of course, most citizens will never live up to their civic responsibilities. Popular sovereignty can produce tyranny of the majority. Authors of democratic constitutions and philosophers of democratic theory have acknowledged and grappled with this problem for centuries. After all, under their powdered wigs, most founding fathers of Western democracies were more elitist and less trusting of the masses than any PAP scholar-technocrat. Therefore, while every democratic system requires the government to be elected by the people and to act for them, each also carves out domains to be insulated from the vagaries of public opinion. In these protected spaces, decision-making is guided by core values, expert judgement and long-term concerns, not popular pressure. Courts, for example, are required to be guided by the law, not TV talking heads, opinion polls or lynch mobs. Similarly, liberal democracies did not put man on the moon or decipher DNA by giving all citizens equal say in the enterprise. There are times when the ablest people need to be given the space to do the job with minimum interference by the rest of us.

Exactly where to draw the line between public participation and managerial autonomy is something we have to work out domain by domain, paying attention to other countries' best practices and worst mistakes. When countries overdo popular participation, the result may be governmental inefficiency or, paradoxically, the rise of demagogues who hijack mass movements for their own ends. On the other hand, inadequate public accountability and voice routinely leads to corruption and abuse of power.

Democracies have found that the most promising approaches lie at neither extreme. They need state institutions that are open to public scrutiny and subject to on-going checks and balances, but that are also guided by their own professional ethos and granted sufficient autonomy to get their jobs done. Yes, democracy always carries the risk of a bad government being voted in. And, yes, such a government could do irreparable damage to Singapore. But if we are unusually fragile, it's not because we're small. It's because our system of checks and balances is weak. No matter how strong its

mandate, an elected government's power to do harm needs to be limited by independent institutions and civil liberties.

This is the kind of nuanced debate we should be having in Singapore, not democracy: good or bad. A detailed audit of our political system would probably show mixed results. In some areas, popular participation is being unreasonably obstructed. In particular, Singapore is a laggard—even by non-Western standards—in introducing open government reforms such as the right to information (Chapter 11). Since the late 20th century, many countries have seen the wisdom of empowering ordinary citizens with government information on demand, thus crowdsourcing the battle against corruption and inefficiency.

The government's standard answer when we ask for more accountability is that Singaporeans get to hold it to account every five years in the voting booth. The problem, though, is that Singapore does not pass some of the democratic tests for free and fair elections. The polling process itself is as clean as one can reasonably expect.

But elections are not just about what happens on polling day. Democratic choice is a process requiring certain conditions to be met on both the demand and supply sides. On the demand side, voters must be able to learn about and discuss their choices fully—which requires much more freedom of media and public assembly than we currently enjoy. On the supply side, contenders for power must not be unfairly disadvantaged long before the polls—an independent election commission is a must, particularly to prevent gerrymandering. Nor should they be obstructed from fulfilling their mandates if they win—which is the effect of denying opposition MPs any say in their constituencies' People's Association machinery.

A thorough democratic audit would also reveal some aspects of Singapore's political system that are too susceptible to populism. Due to objections from religious conservatives, the government has refused to decriminalise sex between gay men or allow LGBT activists to campaign openly for their rights. This nod to

conservative public opinion subverts equality, which is a foundational principle of democracy and which no group should be denied just because it's reviled by others.



Democratising Singapore isn't about importing any other country's system or values wholesale. There is no single model; advanced democracies have some features that are exemplary and others we should avoid. Singapore has strengths of its own. Few countries match our government agencies' frontline services. This matters because, in every country, most citizens' encounters with government are mainly with its bureaucracy; being demeaned by petty bureaucrats can make a mockery of the democratic principle of government for the people.

Best practices aren't only to be found in mature democracies or rich countries. In 2017, Mongolia formally adopted the practice of deliberative polling, becoming the first country in the world to require lawmakers to consult the public through this mode of consultation. Deliberative polling involves gathering a representative cross section of citizens, prepping them with balanced briefing materials and then engaging them in face-to-face discussions. Only then are they given survey questionnaires to answer. The small-group discussions allow citizens to hear one another's perspectives, unfiltered by media or political representatives.

Developed by James Fishkin at Stanford University's communication department, the method has been consistently shown to moderate citizens' views and to come up with constructive suggestions. The evidence contradicts the pessimistic view that citizens will always vote ignorantly and selfishly, and that open debate will only polarise them. Deliberative polling shows that, given a chance, they can use democratic choice in a thoughtful and responsible manner.

Stable, compact, digitally connected and highly educated,

Singapore has better conditions than most for deepening its democracy. First, however, it will need to get over its instinctive defensive reaction the moment the D-word is brought up. That reflex may have something to do with decades of Western haranguing. Our country was born in a world divided, between the liberal democratic model of competitive politics and markets on the one hand, and the statist model of one-party communist rule on the other. We lie somewhere in between these two poles. The pressure, however, came only from one side. The communists gave up on exporting their model. But Western politicians, journalists and activists kept trying to recreate Singapore in their own image.

Lee Kuan Yew was not the sort to play the role of humble student, so he went on the offensive, pointing out the dysfunctions in Western democracies. Other PAP politicians and diplomats followed his lead. These government spokesmen were like a talented school debating team who kept being assigned the same motion: This House Believes Liberal Democracy is The Answer for All Nations. And they were always put on the opposing side. After decades of practice, it's little wonder the PAP team got very comfortable with speaking up against democracy. Over time, the habit became national dogma.

I wonder how differently things might have turned out had the West looked inwards while China continued to export its political model. Then, Singapore's most vocal foreign critics would have been *Global Times* and CCTV, not *The New York Times* or *The Economist*. The Communist Youth League, not Human Rights Watch.

In that alternate universe, the PAP's foreign critics would be chiding it for being too open and soft. Encircled thus, Lee Kuan Yew would probably have counterattacked, criticising communist regimes for being insular, inflexible and intolerant of competition: "The incessant exhortation to progress, the constant stress of conformity in ideology, ideas and action, they lead to drab uniformity." He would have pointed out the poor track record of non-democracies: "There are many examples of authoritarian

governments whose economies have failed.” And communism’s lack of resilience: “If China’s political structures do not adjust to accommodate the changes in its society resulting from high rates of growth, India will have an advantage because of its more flexible political system in the longer term.”

These quotations are not hypothetical. They are from Lee Kuan Yew speeches in 1971 and 2005. Such statements are few and far between, but I don’t think it’s because PAP leaders admired totalitarian states more than democratic ones. It’s just that they were never called upon to defend Singapore’s democratic features. Perhaps that day will come, with China rising and US interest in Asia on the wane. It would be nice, though, if it didn’t take a geopolitical reordering to encourage the PAP and Singapore to treat democracy as a national virtue to strengthen, not an invading virus to resist.