

The Persistence of Support for the Ruling Party in Singapore: A Study of Competitive Authoritarianism

Abstract

This thesis investigates the reasons behind the continuation of legitimisation for the ruling party in Singapore, despite its undemocratic practices. The main hypothesis is that the ruling party has effectively utilised competitive authoritarianism, which involves the use of manipulation and repression to maintain control over the public and convince or pressure them to vote for the party. Through an explanatory case study utilising the deviant case model, the analysis found that Singapore exhibits several characteristics of a competitive authoritarian state, including elections that are not fully free and fair, limited protection of civil liberties, and an unequal playing field for opposition parties. Despite these issues, a majority of respondents in a survey indicated confidence in the ruling party and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Singapore. The study concludes that the ruling party has been successful in its implementation of competitive authoritarianism and in convincing the public that the government's responsibility is to govern and make decisions for the public rather than on the behalf of the public.

Key words: Singapore, Competitive Authoritarianism, Authoritarian Tools, Democracy, Civil Rights, Co-Optation

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Abbreviations

PAP – People’s Action Party

SEA – Southeast Asia

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

ABS – Asian Barometer Survey

1 Introduction

One of the most basic things regarding democracy and elections that I think both you as the reader and I at least can agree is an ideal is that in a free election the people would remove any overly unsavoury elements. That in a free election the people shouldn't vote on a party that's actively year after year dismantling or at least not improving on the fundamental rights and freedoms for its citizens.

But there is one country that defies this, a country with a government who clearly doesn't promote democratic values, fundamental rights, and freedoms. A country that clearly isn't a full democracy as can be seen in its Democracy Index score of 6.23 (out of 10) and a Global Freedom score of 47 (out of a 100).¹

But in a country where a good election year the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP) would receive close to 70% of the votes. And a catastrophic election would be to receive 60% of the votes. And yet, it holds what are seen as free election. There is no vote tampering, no threatening and no intimidation and the participation is high. Genuine opposition parties exist, several even. But none of these seriously claim that they could overtake the PAP in an election. And what of the PAP, a party that has been in power since 1959. A party that has had its power transferred from the father and Singapore's first ever Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to his son Lee Hsien Loong in an almost dynastical way.²

¹ Freedom House, "Countries and Territories", <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores> (accessed 2022-12-16) and, The Economist, "A new low for global democracy", Published 2022-02-09, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/09/a-new-low-for-global-democracy> (accessed 2022-12-16)

² Sal Giolando, "Technocracy, Autocracy, and Democracy in Singapore", *Democratic Erosion*, published 2022-03-07, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/03/07/technocracy-autocracy-and-democracy-in-singapore/> (accessed 2022-12-21)

How did Singapore end up this way? With the people repeatedly legitimising what seems to be a non-democratic regime. Why do the people of Singapore continue to legitimise this party and regime?

We will in this thesis take a deep look at how a party can balance the tightrope between satisfying its citizens by (among other things) holding elections to earn some democratic legitimacy. But simultaneously imposing a strict authoritarian control on such elections to maintain their grasp on power.³

1.1 Research Problem, Aim and Hypotheses

The research question in this thesis is “*Why do the people of Singapore continue to legitimise the ruling party?*”. The aim is to uncover why the logical thought that people wouldn't in an overwhelming amount and by free choice, put their trust and vote in an undemocratic party. Id est what is the reason for Singapore being a deviant case. And can we find an alternative explanation.

The hypotheses are that the ruling party have with great success been using competitive authoritarianism to give people what they think that they want. And that the people have for the most case bought the story sold to them by the PAP. The authoritarian features of repression, combined with the competitive features that create the appearance of choice, have been a highly effective means of creating an outlier.

³ Andreas Schedler, 2002, “Elections without democracy: The menu of manipulation”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 36-37.

2 Historical Background

2.1.1 British Colonization and its Impact

It could be said that Singapore's modern history started with the establishment of a British trade-station on the island in 1819 by Stamford Raffles and the colonization that came because of that. Singapore's highly strategic location led to it becoming a natural trading station in South-East Asia (SEA) and later one of the largest ones. In 1826 Singapore became included in the Straits Settlements, a group of smaller trade colonies established by the East India Company.⁴

In 1867, Singapore became a Crown Colony as part of the Straits Settlements, an overseas territory directly ruled by the British Crown. As a Crown Colony, Singapore did not have representation in the British Parliament or its own representative government. Instead, it was governed by a governor appointed by the Crown and answerable to the colonial office in the UK. The governor had significant authority and was advised by either an advisory council or a combination of an executive council and a legislative council. The members of these councils were generally selected by the governor. Crown Colonies were created to bring the colonies under closer control of the crown, and in that way prevent them from achieving self-governance.⁵

⁴ Nationalencyklopedin, "Straits Settlements", <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/straits-settlements>, (accessed 2022-11-14), and, Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/singapore>, (accessed 2022-11-14).

⁵ Encyclopedia, "Crown Colony", Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/crown-colony>, (accessed 2022-11-14).

In the coming years Singapore got a big influx of people, the British imported unqualified workers from China and India. As well as a big wave of immigration from south China. This led to the original population of Malay becoming a minority.⁶

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had a major impact on Singapore. It became a major port city with a thriving opium trade and a reputation for poverty and secret societies. At the same time, it was also a prosperous British colony with luxurious amenities such as the Cricket Club, Raffles Hotel, and Victoria Theatre. The shorter travel times facilitated by steamboats were accompanied by improvements in communication, including the laying of underwater telecommunications cables between Singapore and London in 1871. This enabled rapid communication between the two locations, leading to a strong link between Singapore and London. The telegram office in Singapore handled 10,000 messages per day by 1882, and the first telephone line was laid in 1879, with 256 lines in operation by 1894.⁷

During World War II, Singapore was attacked and occupied by Japan multiple times and was used as a base for Japanese operations in Southeast Asia. The strategically important British colony fell to the Japanese on February 15, 1942, after a difficult battle and the cut-off of its fresh water supply. This marked the end of British rule in East Asia and is considered one of Great Britain's worst military disasters in modern history. In 1946, Singapore became its own Crown Colony, and its population grew rapidly due to high immigration and birth rates.⁸

⁶ Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", (accessed 2022-11-15).

⁷ Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", (accessed 2022-11-15) and, Michael D Barr, 2019, *Singapore: A Modern History*, I. B. Tauris & Company Limited, London & New York, p. 86.

⁸ Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", (accessed 2022-11-15) and, Barr, 2019, p. 103-104.

2.1.2 Independence and Political Developments

In 1957, the Federation of Malay gained independence and Singapore remained under British rule. In 1963, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and the Federation of Malay joined into the state of Malaysia. However, due to strained relations between the leaders in Singapore and the government in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore was effectively expelled from Malaysia in 1965 and became a sovereign state. This was not the desired outcome for any of the parties involved, including the ruling elite in Singapore, the government in Kuala Lumpur, and the British.⁹

In 1954 was the People's Action Party (PAP) founded by the lawyer Lee Kuan Yew, and the party got power in the 1959 election and has since then been the de facto leading political power in Singapore. One of Lee Kuan Yew's early projects was to substantially try to improve Singapore's reputation and to establish rule of law. Part of the reformation of Singapore was an emphasis on social engineering, ideological schooling, a strict law, and free trade. This succeeded and has led to strong economic development.¹⁰

As a part of a change in the constitution in 1991 the president is nowadays elected by the people and has some veto powers, most notoriously in financial matters. But other than that, the role of president is mostly ceremonial as the executive power is held by the government.¹¹

⁹ Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", (accessed 2022-11-15) and, Barr, 2019, p. xix.

¹⁰ Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", (accessed 2022-11-16).

¹¹ Nationalencyklopedin, "Statsskick och politik", <http://www.ne.se/upplagsverk/encyklopedi/lang/singapore/statsskick-och-politik> (accessed 2022-11-16).

2.1.3 Rise of the PAP and today

Lee Kuan Yew's rise took actual speed in 1956 during the negotiations that were conducted in London. It highlighted both his skills as a serious and intelligent politician, his charming and familiar English bearing and that while he might be from a very different context and continent, he was neither unrefined nor a wild radical militant that some had painted him as. Rather, Lee Kuan Yew started to assume the role of Singapore's only logical inheritor in the eyes of the Colonial Office.¹²

Meanwhile back in Singapore Lee Kuan Yew was still in opposition, but his aims were firmly set on continuing building a party that would be in majority after the next election. And that he did, almost. In the 1959 election his party (the PAP) won 43 out of 51 seats and therefore got a stable majority. But there were internal struggles in the party, Lee Kuan Yew and his group would later be known as the "Old Guard", a middle centrist group in between the struggles for power between a populist left wing and a populist right wing in the party.¹³

The struggles were however cleared out and Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990 when he stepped down and let his successor in the PAP, Goh Chok Tong take the role as Prime Minister for fourteen years (1990-2004). By 2004 Lee Kuan Yew's son Lee Hsien Loong had done such an impressive career in the military and as Chief of the Army, and in the government as both trade and industries minister, defence minister and later vice-Prime Minister and Finance minister before finally in 2004 being sworn into the same position as his father had before him, Prime Minister.¹⁴

¹² Michael D Barr, 2019, *Singapore: A Modern History*, I. B. Tauris & Company Limited, London & New York, p. 113.

¹³ Barr, 2019, p. 113.

¹⁴ Nationalencyklopedin, "Lee Hsien Loong", <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/lee-hsien-loong> (accessed 2023-01-03), and Nationalencyklopedin, "Lee Kuan Yew", <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/lee-kuan-yew> (accessed 2023-01-03), and Nationalencyklopedin, "Singapore", <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/singapore> (accessed 2023-01-03)

3 A Case Study

What is a case study? How do you choose a case/case? That might be some of the first questions one asks themselves regarding case studies.

I'll start this methods section broadly by giving a definition of case studies and after that I'll slowly narrow it down to my own paper and the relevant things regarding it.

Case studies is a bit of an unclear term, especially if one considers the many similar terms in the field of science exist: case-control, case history, case method, case record, case work, single case and so on. So, what I refer to when I say case and case study is a definition borrowed from John Gerring "a spatially and temporally delimited phenomenon of theoretical significance". A case can be a state like entity, an organisation, or an event. But notwithstanding what the case is, it must comprise of the phenomena that an argument tries to explain. For example, in a study about revolutions, cases will be made up of revolutions.¹⁵

The spatial bounders of a case are usually easy to define compared to the temporal boundaries. It's more clear cut to talk about something spatial like the borders of a country or a municipality then something temporal like a revolution, a series of crises or a movement for example.¹⁶

To intensively study a small number of cases or even only a single one while drawing on observational data is a case study. A case study is highly focused in the sense that the majority of the researchers time is spent analysing and (then) presenting the chosen cases or case. Assuming that the length or the time of the study is

¹⁵ John Gerring, *Case study research: principles and practices*, 2017, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, pp. 26-27.

¹⁶ Gerring, 2017, p. 27.

fixed one must also realise that the more cases in the study the less time can be devoted to each one.¹⁷

One of the most fundamental questions someone that does a case study will have to ask themselves is if the study is causal or descriptive. The causal case is further divided into function categories: estimating, explanatory and diagnostic. An estimating study is intending to assess the effects of a particular factor or combinations of factors. A diagnostic study intended to determine if a hypothesis is true or not. And the goal of an explanatory is to identify a hypothesis.¹⁸

3.1.1 Selection of a Case

The selection of a case or cases are usually influenced by things such as the perceived significance of the case or cases. Some cases have a world historical significance, say world wars, revolutions, genocides, and interventions. Other cases might have significance because of its meaning to a population or group (social group, organisation etc.). If the primary goal with the study is to choose a case for its perceived significance the study would be idiographic. Such a study does not give any claims at all to generality, and does therefore not qualify as a case study as per our definition.¹⁹

If a case wants to be broader than itself, a case study, its argument needs to be in some way representative in a larger population. In (what we earlier called) a causal study we have something called unit homogeneity or casual comparability. With this it's meant that representativeness refers to the value that's expected of outcome given its status on the casual variable that were of interest for us.²⁰

¹⁷ Gerring, 2017, pp. 27–29.

¹⁸ Gerring, 2017, p. 40.

¹⁹ Gerring, 2017, p. 42.

²⁰ Gerring, 2017, p. 45.

3.1.2 Method of this Case Study

This case study is going to be a casual one, and more precisely explanatory. This is evident even in the research question, we already have an outcome, and now are we trying to find a possible cause. Why do Y occur? One well-known critique against case studies of this sort is that the case is being chosen based on its outcome and invite doubts of the study suffering from bias. But this is not the case if done properly, a case should be chosen for its ΔY . It can also be added that an effective case-selection technique that ignores values for the desired outcome is difficult to imagine when the objective is exploratory.²¹

Now will we yet again taper this section and focus upon the actual method this case-study will use. A form of exploratory case-studies, and the form that this study will be using is one of a deviant case. A deviant case or as they sometimes are called an anomalous case is a case that diverges from the expected pattern or what we would assume from common sense or scientific theory. A deviant, or anomalous, case study's objective is to provide a generalizable hypothesis about the subjects of interest while also explaining the unusual example and give a starting point to other situations that are equally anomalous.²²

Cases of a deviant nature are judged with respect to a broad model of casual relationships that include Z (which is a background factor or group of background factors) and Y (which is the outcome). The method chooses cases which if one were to reference them against a bigger group would result in a surprising result. The cases are deviant in that they don't fit the model, if they are poorly explained by it.²³

Deviance can however only be seen in contrast to normalcy or a general model. It's therefore helpful for someone dealing with deviant cases to ask themselves,

²¹ Gerring, 2017, pp. 66-67.

²² Gerring, 2017, pp. 74-76.

²³ Gerring, 2017, p. 76.

relative to what generalised model (the combination of background variables) does the case act as a deviant?²⁴

One goal with a deviant case is to illustrate a factor that later might be applicable to other cases that now would be seen as deviant. The result of this is that a deviant case study with a favourable outcome will be generalisable to a wider population of cases. The other outcome is that the case analysis doesn't conclude in a generalizable explanation for Y. The outcome may be that the case in question is deviant for idiosyncratic reasons. Reasons that might not be relevant for other cases or that are accidental. This still has some value though, it still further our knowledge to know that there are exceptions that are just different.²⁵

3.1.3 The Deviance of the Chosen Case

So, how do we apply this? The research question is: “Why do the people of Singapore continue to legitimise the ruling party?”. The case is Singapore's politics and political life, everything from voter and party behaviour to governance and civil rights. The way this is deviant is that as we mentioned in the introduction, strays from what could be seen as typical voter behaviour under the rule of a party that is almost taking away more rights than its giving. When looking at a newspaper and measuring the difference in support towards the governing party in Singapore compared to say Hong Kong or Latin America (who both have been plagued by massive protest against the government)²⁶ Singapore stands out in its 60-70% vote for the ruling non-democratic party, it appears deviant.

²⁴ Gerring, 2017, pp. 76–77.

²⁵ Gerring, 2017, p. 77.

²⁶ The Economist, “A region caught between stagnation and angry street protests”, 2022-06-16, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2022/06/16/a-region-caught-between-stagnation-and-angry-street-protests>, (accessed 2023-01-03), and Human Rights Watch, Hong Kong Protests, <https://www.hrw.org/blog-feed/hong-kong-protests>, (accessed 2023-01-03)

3.2 Bias and Critical Thinking

While judging evidence and sources, one must take in account basically the same things as judging historical, criminal, or journalistic evidence. And that is that sources matter, and that means that we must find a way to judge the quality of these:²⁷

- Validity: That the source isn't biased.
- Authenticity: That the source isn't fake or under control of a biased actor.
- Relevance: That the source is relevant to the question.
- Proximity: That the source is qualified to provide the information you seek.
- Diversity: Overall the sources show a diversity in interests, viewpoints or/and methods. Allowing us to find conflicts in the field.

Bias will always be something that one needs to keep in mind. As well as the different strengths and weaknesses of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. An event later retold by a person who was there is not necessarily correct since how the memory works and the flow of time affects the reliability of the memory. At the same time a book written by someone who had interviewed several people there does not need to be fully reliable either since that could have been done with that person's lenses and biases affecting the data.²⁸

²⁷ Gerring, 2017, p. 172.

²⁸ Gerring, 2017, p. 173.

3.3 Replicability and Transparency

Replicability and transparency are a part of the internal validity of the case. Replicability means in a general sense that it is possible for someone else with the same data to “follow” the instructions and get the same result as the original researcher. If the information in the original work is not enough to replicate the study, then it has low replicability. And one must either blindly trust the researchers’ work or place doubt on the conclusion. Transparency is if the researcher has kept the research process open and shows how he or her reached the conclusions. These two things are closely related and intertwined in that a good transparency will lead to replicability.²⁹

To achieve a good transparency and replicability with a one case study will we try to follow some guidelines proposed by John Gerring:³⁰

- Case selection: Account for how the case or cases was chosen, as well as if any changes was made along the way
- Theory: Make the theoretical argument obvious and explain it. If it’s a casual case the predicted changes of X and the anticipated effects for Y together with relevant background circumstances (Z). Account for the scope of the study or the population.
- Storage: Data should after it’s been anonymized (if it needed to be) be stored in a safe and easily accessible way.
- Evidence-gathering: One should account for how case evidence or sources was collected or used to allow someone to replicate the steps if need be.
- Analysis: Make a clear account of how the data was analysed. This could be a challenge for qualitative studies, but things like explaining background or implicit arguments and being open during the process helps.

²⁹ Gerring, 2017, pp. 208-209.

³⁰ Gerring, 2017, pp. 209-210.

4 Theory

In this section, we'll look at the several theories I've selected to examine Singapore from and that, in my opinion, will offer me the best opportunity to resolve my research question.

Competitive authoritarianism is a hybrid type of governing. With both flavours from democracy and authoritarianism, but not full democracy nor authoritarianism.³¹ Several things need to be clarified here. What do we mean and how do we define: democracy, authoritarianism, the difference between authoritarianism and its sibling totalitarianism, and lastly the combination of the two (democracy and authoritarianism) in competitive authoritarianism.

This section (and therefore the theory) will mainly be based on Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way's influential work *Competitive Authoritarianism - Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Paul Brooker's *Non-Democratic Regimes*, Andreas Schedler's article *The Menu of Manipulation* and Lee Morgenbesser's article *The autocratic mandate: elections, legitimacy, and regime stability in Singapore*.

The books and articles by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, Paul Brooker, Andreas Schedler, and Lee Morgenbesser are essential for understanding competitive authoritarianism. Levitsky and Way's "Competitive Authoritarianism" is a key text on the topic of competitive authoritarian regimes, while Brooker's "Non-Democratic Regimes" offers a broad perspective on non-democratic regimes. Schedler's "The Menu of Manipulation" examines tactics used by autocratic regimes to manipulate elections and maintain power. Morgenbesser's "The autocratic mandate" focuses on the case of Singapore and how the ruling party has used competitive

³¹ Schedler, 2002, pp. 36-50.

authoritarian tactics. These sources provide a thorough understanding of competitive authoritarianism and will be crucial for a well-rounded analysis in my essay.

4.1 A Definition Democracy

Firstly democracy, here we are going to use the definition from Levitsky's book *Competitive Authoritarianism*. He presents a so-called procedural minimum definition of democracy that includes four basic characteristics: 1) competitive, fair, and free elections; 2) complete adult suffrage; 3) extensive protection for civil liberties, including but not limited to freedom of the press, speech, and association; and (4) the existence of unelected custodial forces that limits the elected officials' ability to govern. Levitsky does however add a fifth and final condition: 5) a sensibly level playing field between the current officeholder and the opposition. Of course, we can't expect there to be no form of incumbent advantage. The current officeholders will both have a larger advantaged access to media and financing, having had a certain number of years to place "their people" in important public jobs and positions and the ability to pork-barrel both members of their own party and more moderate members of other parties to lend their support. Or at least not being quiet in their opposition.³²

In a true democracy this favoured position however won't lead to an actual domination over the opponent. If the party in office controls the state recourses and state institutions are so severe and one-sided so that the opposition are decidedly limited in political competition, it's no longer a democracy.³³

³² Steven Levitsky & Lucan A. Way (eds.), 2010, *Competitive Authoritarianism - Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 7.

³³ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 7.

4.2 Totalitarianism

The concept of totalitarian rule emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly with the rise of Mussolini in Italy. Totalitarian rule is characterized by the idea that "everything in the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state," as described by Mussolini himself. It involves a tyrannical government that seeks to control every aspect of an individual's life and dictates their thoughts as well as their actions. George Orwell's novel 1984 and Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* further explored this idea of a state that seeks complete and utter dominance over every individual.³⁴

In the middle of the 1950s Brzezinski and Friedrich presented a widely recognized and applicable model for totalitarianism in their work *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. They have six indicators or symptoms: 1) a one-party system, typically led by one person; 2) an ideology; 3) terroristic police; 4) a weapons monopoly; 5) a centrally directed economy; and 6) a communications monopoly. However, totalitarianism did after a time in the spotlight of political science got deemed to be too specific, the number of cases it covered were too rare.³⁵

³⁴ Paul Brooker, *Non-democratic regimes*, 2014, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, pp. 14-15.

³⁵ Brooker, 2014, pp. 14-20.

4.3 Authoritarianism

One important distinction to make is the one between non-competitive and competitive authoritarianism. In a fully non-competitive authoritarian state there would be no way for an opposition to actually contest for office. That said we must not be allowed to fall into the trap of calling any and all non-democratic systems authoritarian.

Let's first look at a definition of authoritarianism by Linz from Paul Brookers book *Non-Democratic Regimes*. Linz's' model has four characteristics:³⁶

1. Limited political pluralism: Where limited is the key word according to Linz. Political competition is allowed, and the political opposition might even have some influence. But they have no real chance to gain power.
2. The absence of an overhanging guiding ideology: While ideology may be present and even loudly proclaimed it's not guiding the regime. It doesn't have the same utopian outlook as ideologies, rather a distinctive mentality.
3. The absence of a large-scale political mobilisation: While exceptions can occur here, they are in those cases in the very beginning of the party's history and in controlled forms.
4. A leader (or a small group) that wields their power in a way that's predictable but not so clearly defined. Even if the regime's leader or leaders might seem to be absolute and arbitrary in the way they wield their power, is the power in question being applied in predictable limits.

All these four characteristics are complex and nuanced, and therefore it shows the difficulty of comparing modern non-totalitarian non-democratic states to each other.³⁷

³⁶ Brooker, 2014, pp. 20–22.

³⁷ Brooker, 2014, pp. 20–22.

4.4 Competitive Authoritarianism

First let's ask ourselves if and why we would need more subtypes of regimes. In the 1980s and 90s political scientists studying democratisation produced tens if not hundreds of new subtypes of regimes. This did lead to something of a conceptual confusion due to the excessive emergence of new words and ideas, something Collier and Levitsky warned about. And they were not alone, Richard Snyder requested a more moderate approach in forming new regime concepts. Snyder contends that we as scholars should carefully evaluate the null hypothesis that the political phenomena in question are not novel enough to justify new categories and labels. Rather than to succumb to the "naturalists' seduction to profess the finding, naming, and categorisation of new political animals.³⁸

According to Levitsky and Way, competitive authoritarianism is a new type of political phenomenon that does not fit into any existing categories. This has led to countries that are not democratic being labelled as democracies, such as Zambia, Ghana, Peru, Russia, and Ukraine in the 1990s. Outlier cases like Cambodia, Belarus, and Russia under Putin have also been labelled as democracies due to the lack of a more appropriate category. Levitsky and Way argue that this approach is problematic because it stretches the definition of democracy to include regimes that violate civil rights and/or have significant electoral irregularities or don't meet the basic procedural requirements for democracy. As Andreas Schedler stated, an authoritarian regime is not less democratic than a democracy, it's clearly undemocratic.³⁹

Competitive authoritarian regimes don't fit into established definitions or subtypes of political systems. Broad definitions such as Freedom House's categories of

³⁸ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 13-14.

³⁹ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 14, and Schedler, Andreas, 2002, p. 37.

"free," "partly free," and "not free" don't capture the complexity of these regimes. They also don't fit into other hybrid categories such as restrictive or semi-competitive democracies, constitutional oligarchies, or tutelary regimes. Additionally, it's not accurate to classify them as a subtype of failed democracy because this can be seen as too lenient towards the presence of non-democratic traits. Finally, competitive authoritarianism does not fit into existing subtypes of authoritarianism such as bureaucratic authoritarianism and post-totalitarianism, largely due to the non-competitive nature of these regimes. Two more recent subtypes of authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, and semi-authoritarianism, relate to non-democracies with multiparty elections but are often interpreted broadly to include both hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regimes. This results in both competitive and non-competitive authoritarian regimes being included under the definition of electoral authoritarianism.⁴⁰

Competitive authoritarianism, the conceptualization we'll employ, is more restrictive than the ones just mentioned. We only include regimes in the definition that allow opposition groups to actively compete for executive power through the use of democratic mechanisms. Such a restrictive definition goes beyond simple conceptual nit-picking. Competitiveness is a fundamentally crucial regime attribute that influences the actions and hopes of all political actors. Competitiveness to get the perks of electoral legitimacy without having to bother with the risks of democratic uncertainty.⁴¹

So, we have our case of competitive authoritarianism. The largest difference between democracy and competitive authoritarianism is that the latter is violating at least one of the core attributes of democracy: either **free elections**, the broad

⁴⁰ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 14-16.

⁴¹ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 16, and Schedler, Andreas, 2002, p. 37.

protection of **civil liberties** or the sensibly **level playing field**. We will focus on one at a time.⁴²

4.4.1 Civil Liberties

Firstly, Civil Liberties, here the foremost rights are the right to free speech, freedom of the press and freedom of association. In a full democracy these rights can technically be infringed upon, say that you for example need a permit from the police for a demonstration, or that you can't slander people or incite to ethnic or racial hatred. But these infringements are not hindering or limiting the opposition's work in a meaningful way. Under a fully authoritarian regime these rights would be severely and systematically breached. The media, opposition and NGOs would not even be slightly protected.⁴³

In a competitive authoritarian state however, the basic civil liberties are at least partially guaranteed. Independent media are allowed to exist, and NGOs and the opposition are allowed to act above ground so to speak. They usually can meet openly and can even to some extent protest the government. Even though they have this ability are government critics like human rights activists, journalists, independent judges, and opposition politicians still facing some intimidation, arrests and in some cases even physical attacks. In some cases, those on the verge of being totalitarian do more overt repression exist. Here can things like imprisonment of opposition leaders, killings of oppression activists and violent suppression of dissent.⁴⁴

What's more common is more subtle forms of assault on the civil liberties, using "legal repression" or the selective application of legal sanctions such as defamation, libel, or tax laws to penalise the opposition. Even though such persecution may legally be the correct enforcement of the law, its application is politicised

⁴² Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 7.

⁴³ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 8.

rather than impartial. Of these the most widespread is probably the usage of defamation laws targeting journalists, editors, and media organisations.⁴⁵

Even while “legal” and other forms of repression in competitive authoritarian states are plainly beyond what is allowed in a democracy, they are not severe enough to drive the opposition underground or into exile. Even occasional civil liberties violations can seriously impede the opposition's ability to organise and challenge the government by increasing the cost of opposition activity (thereby persuading all but the bravest activists to not join the fight and instead remain on the sidelines) and critical media coverage (thereby encouraging self-censorship).⁴⁶

4.4.2 Free Elections

Secondly, free elections, in a democracy the elections are free in that that there is no fraud or voter intimidation, and fair in the meaning that the opposition campaigns on roughly the same class as the incumbent. They are not harassed or repressed, and they are not routinely prevented from accessing the press or other important resources. In a fully authoritarian state actual elections with several serious parties are either non-competitive or non-existent. Elections may be deemed uncompetitive if any of the following conditions are met: (1) major opposition candidates are officially barred from running or effectively excluded in some way on a regular basis. (2) fraud is so pervasive that there is essentially no discernible correlation between voter preferences and the official election results. (3) Repression or legal restrictions effectively prevent opposition parties from holding public campaigns.⁴⁷

A competitive authoritarian regime is one that exhibits characteristics of both authoritarian and democratic systems. On one hand, elections may be deemed competitive because major opposition candidates are allowed to run, there is no

⁴⁵ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 7.

significant election fraud, and opposition parties are permitted to publicly campaign. However, the elections are often not fair due to tactics such as ballot-box stuffing, manipulated voter lists, or falsified results. In other cases, the voting and vote-counting procedures may be somewhat fair, but the overall election process is unfair due to unequal access to funding, media, and the incumbent's misuse of state institutions. Intimidation of voters, opposition activists, and poll monitors, as well as the creation of "no-go" regions for opposition parties, can also impact the fairness of an election. However, an important point is that the abuse in these regimes is not severe or systematic enough to prevent the opposition from organizing a nationwide campaign.⁴⁸

4.4.3 The (un)Level Playing Field

Finally, the (un)level playing field, this is something that most of the competitive authoritarian regimes are characterised by. Evidently, incumbent advantage exists to some extent in all democracies. But the playing field is deemed unfair when: (1) The incumbent party and politicians are routinely benefited at the expense of the opposition. (2) The opposition's capacity to organise and participate in elections is severely hampered. (3) State institutions are frequently used for political purposes. Access to resources, media, and the law are three factors that are particularly significant when discussing an unequal playing field.⁴⁹

Access to resources can be unequal when incumbents use the state to establish or sustain resource inequalities that limit the opposition's ability to compete. This can happen through the direct use of public funds by incumbents, the use of state resources for campaigns, the mobilization of public personnel and security forces en masse to favour the ruling party, and the monopolization of private-sector financing through the use of the state. Incumbents may also use party-owned

⁴⁸ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁹ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 9-10.

businesses or crony- or proxy-owned companies to indirectly give money to the party. This exploitation can result in significant resource advantages, particularly in underdeveloped countries with weaker private sectors.⁵⁰

Access to media is an important factor in ensuring a fair and equal playing field in the political arena. When opposition parties are unable to access media that is widely consumed by the public, it can greatly impact their ability to effectively communicate their message and compete fairly. Incumbents may use various techniques to restrict access to media, including the regulation of broadcast media and politicizing reporting. In some cases, the state may completely control radio and television broadcasting, effectively denying access to the opposition. Even when independent publications are allowed to circulate, they may only reach a limited audience. In other cases, private media organizations may have ties to the ruling party through patronage or proxy ownership, giving the ruling party an unfair advantage in terms of media access. It is important to ensure that all political parties have equal access to media to promote fair competition.⁵¹

The last part is the unequal access to the law. Blackmail, bribery, and/or intimidation are frequently used by incumbents to control the judiciaries, election commissions, and other ostensibly independent arbiters in competing authoritarian regimes. State organisations such as the judiciary and others that serve as referees routinely render decisions in favour of incumbents. As a result, incumbents can do illegal activities, such as breaking democratic protocol, without consequence. Furthermore, it guarantees that important judicial, electoral, or other conflicts will be decided in the incumbent's favour.⁵²

⁵⁰ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 10–11.

⁵¹ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 11.

⁵² Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 12.

4.5 Creating Stability, Earning Legitimacy and Keeping Control or the Toolbox for Authoritarian Rulers

In this section we will go over some other distinctive qualities of competitive authoritarian rule. These are some noticeable patterns in the political life created by the coexistence of authoritarian incumbents and substantial democratic institutions and used by the actors navigating the political life.⁵³

4.5.1 Succession Politics

The first one is succession politics. Because how do you legitimise executive succession in an autocracy, let alone a competitive one. And it's not only the legitimising part that is the problem. It is also the safety and security for the departing incumbent. They don't want to end up in a situation where they get prosecuted, have their assets seized, get driven into exile or get imprisoned. So, they must balance on the edge between choosing someone they think will protect them and not having the "freedom" of a fully authoritarian regime to appoint anyone to their successor. The newly appointed leader still must win competitive elections, so the balance is between electability and trustworthiness. A highly electable character will often have resources and an agenda themselves, and that makes it more of a gamble regarding if it's possible to control them. On the other hand, insiders of the regime, especially those who lack independent power or resources, are more inclined to stick behind the government, especially if their intimate ties to the dictatorship make them susceptible to extortion. However, these politicians frequently lack the electability needed to win elections.⁵⁴

⁵³ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 29.

4.5.2 Informal Institutions

Then we have the informal institutions of competitive authoritarian regimes. Informal institutions of some type exist in basically every regime in some way. Even though they exist in all regimes, informal institutions may play a particularly significant role under competitive authoritarianism given the gap between official (i.e., democratic) rules and regulations and real conduct. Some researchers have recently suggested that these informal institutions are what actors use as a “second best” strategy when the formal institutions fail them and the effort to change them from within are too great. The post-Cold War international climate established incentives for incumbents to use informal tactics of coercion and control while retaining the formal architecture of democracy by boosting the cost of conventional (e.g., single party) authoritarian rule. Informal measures of coercion were frequently essential to the survival of post-Cold War autocracies since they are harder for foreign observers to pinpoint than official instruments of repression (such as press censorship or restrictions on opposition).⁵⁵

4.5.3 Organized Corruption and Repression

Organised corruption is a different informal institution that is prevalent in many authoritarian countries. Blackmail, proxy ownership, bribery, and other illegal transactions are frequently essential to the survival of authoritarian ruling coalitions. Competitive authoritarian regimes also use covert repressive techniques. For instance, many of them target the press and opposition through “legal” repression, or the arbitrary use of legal tools like tax authorities and libel laws. Such repression is formal in the sense that it requires the application of the law, and the use is frequently legally valid, but it is an informal institution in that enforcement is commonly acknowledged to be selective. This type of repression is valuable because of

⁵⁵ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 28.

its legal façade: The world can see prosecution for tax fraud or corruption as upholding the rule of law rather than as persecution.⁵⁶

Authoritarian rulers employ various tactics to crush resistance and maintain control. One tactic is the use of unofficial or "privatised" violence, in which state-planned violence is carried out by non-state actors such as gangs, vigilantes, paramilitaries, and militias. This allows for anonymity in the eyes of the world, as these groups are not officially affiliated with the government's security apparatus. Another tactic is repression, which is the real or threatened use of physical penalties against individuals or organizations. Repression can take the form of low intensity coercion, which is a subtler, less obvious form of repression used against lesser players or organizations, or high intensity coercion, which targets well-known persons, sizable crowds, or significant organizations. The main objective of repression is to make collective action more challenging and less appealing to political leaders, and the success of this tactic depends on the willingness of citizens and opponents to confront their leaders; thus, the costs and rewards must be carefully weighed.⁵⁷

4.5.4 The Conduct of Political Parties

Under competitive authoritarian regimes the conduct of the party is unique or at least distinctive. The common perception that parties maximise votes only holds true in situations when elections serve as the only game in town. Parties in such a situation operate normally inside the political system as they would be expected to do: They take part in elections with the intention of getting the most votes; if they fall short, they join the parliamentary opposition. However, parties frequently engage in a "dual game" that incorporates both electoral and regime goals in unconsolidated democracies and hybrid regimes. In other words, tactics designed to

⁵⁶ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 28-29 and, Lee Morgenbesser, 2017, "The autocratic mandate: elections, legitimacy and regime stability in Singapore", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 207-208.

strengthen or undermine the current system are used in addition to, and sometimes even in place of, traditional vote-maximising tactics.⁵⁸

In a competitive authoritarian regime, parties must treat elections and other democratic institutions seriously to acquire or maintain power, but the playing field is often uneven. To level the playing field and compete effectively, opposition parties may adopt tactics such as staging mass protests or boycotting elections to challenge the government and bring about democratizing change. This means that while electoral competition and vote-maximization are important considerations, opposition parties in competitive authoritarian regimes may also engage in tactics targeted at disrupting the status quo and seeking to change the rules of the game. This dual approach, balancing the need to succeed under the current norms while also working to change them, is necessary to contend and survive in an unfair political environment.⁵⁹

4.5.5 Creating Stability and Earning Legitimacy

Let's turn to how stability is created, one of the most important aspects for an authoritarian government of any flavour. One method is co-optation, this is shortly explained by Lee Morgenbesser as integrating portions of the population into the regime's network by giving out benefits. A popular way to do this is through some form of patronage. This would be for example that citizens receive benefits and services in return for displaying their allegiance to the governing party. The objective is to create a normative commitment to submit to authority, and in that way lowering the likelihood that minor demonstrations on particularistic problems may escalate into a serious crisis. In addition to patronage, official organisations like legislatures and parties may also be used to co-opt people. Political elites are given the chance to progress their careers, influence policy, get parliamentary immunity,

⁵⁸ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 29.

⁵⁹ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 30-32.

acquire corporate contracts, receive cash incentives, or take on a party position in return for being loyal to the leader. Over time, the legitimacy of this trade mechanism through political elites' motivation to revolt.⁶⁰

Authoritarian regimes try to gain legitimacy by seeking the approval of the citizens they rule over. This is done by conforming to established rules and principles, and by getting the consent of the people through elections or other means. However, it can be difficult for these regimes to align their values with those of the citizens, and so they may try to gain legitimacy through tactics like pretending to conform to established rules and principles. Even in situations where elections are flawed or manipulated, is this frequently accomplished by citing ideas like democracy and the will of the people.⁶¹

Performance legitimacy refers to the idea that a government's effectiveness in meeting certain goals, such as economic development or maintaining law and order, can serve as justification for its right to rule. This concept suggests that a government's prolonged effectiveness over time can give it legitimacy by providing services such as rising living standards or comprehensive social security. However, claims of performance legitimacy can be problematic because they can be challenged by rivals offering greater benefits, are susceptible to external factors and rising expectations, and may be difficult to distinguish from other forms of legitimacy based on ideology or other goals. Additionally, it may be debated whether obedience to a high-performing dictatorship is based on duty or self-interest. Authoritarian regimes may rely on a combination of different forms of legitimacy, including performance legitimacy, and electoral- or ideological legitimacy.⁶²

⁶⁰ Lee Morgenbesser, 2017, "The autocratic mandate: elections, legitimacy and regime stability in Singapore", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 207.

⁶¹ Morgenbesser, 2017, pp. 208–209.

⁶² Brooker, 2014, pp. 109-110.

5 Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Analysis

The analysis will be split in two parts, first one part to confirm that Singapore indeed is a competitive authoritarian state. And the second part will be to show how Singapore's regime uses the tools from what I called the "competitive authoritarian toolbox" to reach its otherwise surprising results. I will try to keep the analysis straightforward and try to make it easily consumable but at the same time nuanced and interesting.

5.1.1 Is Singapore a Competitive Authoritarian State?

In this section we will look at the three big things that a state needs to violate to be seen as a competitive authoritarian state. It was either the **free elections**, the broad protection of **civil liberties** or the sensibly **level playing field**. We will just like in the theory chapter focus at one at a time.

Free Elections

Here we had three criteria for a competitive authoritarian regime where all of them stem from that the election might be free, but not fair. The last criteria however are highly tied in with the level playing field. And I will therefore save it until then. (1) Competitive elections where the opposition can take part mostly without the risk of being disqualified, barred, or harassed. (2) Unfair tactics during the election can

take place but voting needs to be meaningful for the general public. (3) The unequal access to funding, the media, as well as the incumbents misuse of state institutions.⁶³

Let's start by looking at the opposition. Candidates and parties can take part in elections without the risk of being disqualified, barred, or discredited. There are cases of opposition politicians being charged with crimes such as "breach of trust" or "making an address in a public place without a licence". It's hard to determine if these are actual crimes or things that are invented to besmirch and hinder the opposition. A worrying cloud however is the law that automatically disqualifies MPs (Ministers of Parliament) from their place in Parliament if they get convicted of a crime with a fine over 10 000 dollars. Not regarding if the crime was careless driving or corruption, bribery, or sexual misconduct. Worth to note however is that this monetary limit was increased from 2000 dollars to today's 10 000 on the 9 of May 2022.⁶⁴

On a more structural level do the sitting ministers have the ability to limit access to material they believe to be incorrect or against the public interest or require correction notifications to be added. Something that was used many times during the 2020-campaign.⁶⁵ This goes into both the first criteria by being both a way to discredit and put the trustworthiness of the opposition into doubt. And into the second

⁶³ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁴ Yuen-C, Tham, "MPs will lose their seat if fined at least \$10,000, up from current \$2,000", *The Straits Times*, 2022-05-09, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/mps-will-lose-their-seat-if-fined-at-least-10000-up-from-current-2000> (accessed 2022-12-29) and, Human Rights Watch, "Singapore: Drop Charges Against Opposition Leader", 2011-02-08, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/08/singapore-drop-charges-against-opposition-leader>, (accessed 2022-12-29) and, Low, Domenic, "Lawyer and opposition politician Lim Tean to be charged in court with criminal breach of trust, unlawful stalking", *The Straits Times*, 2022-05-10, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/lawyer-and-opposition-politician-lim-tean-to-be-charged-in-court-for-criminal-breach-of-trust-unlawful-stalking>, (accessed 2022-12-29)

⁶⁵ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" <https://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2022> (accessed 2022-12-29)

one by being an unfair tactic to (yet again) discredit the opposition during the election period.

Furthermore, on the first criteria, the PAP often use what we can call soft oppression, an example of this is that when they wanted two of the bigger names in the opposition removed, the Singapore Democratic Party leader Chee Soon Juan and the Workers Party leader J. B. Jeyaretnam instead of jailing them they utilised the strong control they have over the law and judiciary to clear away from the political playfield. This is a sign of a repressive strategy that aims for maximum efficacy at little expense for the regime.⁶⁶

Civil Liberties

In a competitive authoritarian state, civil liberties are partially protected, and independent media and opposition groups may face intimidation and other forms of repression. These states may use "legal repression" to selectively enforce laws to penalise the opposition, hindering their ability to organise and challenge the government. Civil liberties violations can discourage opposition activity and encourage self-censorship.⁶⁷

Let's start with freedom of press and the independent media, or rather the lack of the independent media. The government indirectly owns all domestic radio station, newspapers, and television channels through government-affiliated companies. Media outlets may occasionally run critical articles, but self-censorship is common, and the media often support government policy. The government uses the threat of terrorism and racial or religious conflicts to justify limiting free expression. Media outlets, bloggers, and public figures who express views that are considered seditious, libellous, or offensive to religious sensibilities may face serious consequences. Online news outlets are required to obtain licences and comply with

⁶⁶ Morgenbesser, 2017, p. 211.

⁶⁷ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 8–9.

requests from authorities to remove illegal content. However, international media outlets and some new online domestic ones that present alternative viewpoints are widely available and popular. But to exemplify, in 2021, did the legal pressure on online media outlets and their staff increased, including but not limited to interrogations, warnings, fines, and a defamation conviction. One outlet, the Online Citizen, was also suspended and had its licences cancelled by the media regulator.⁶⁸

The right to religious freedom is mostly upheld, but religious behaviour that is viewed as endangering towards racial or religious harmony is not permitted. Muslim religious teachers must be certified by a recognition board, which is overseen by the state's Islamic Religious Council. This system is designed to ensure that only state-approved forms of Islam are taught.⁶⁹

Regarding academic freedom, public schools' national education component has been criticised for focusing excessively on the ruling party's role in history. Public universities and political research institutions have direct links to the government, enabling political influence and interference in hiring and firing. Self-censorship is common among academics who may face consequences for critical speech.⁷⁰

In Singapore, the freedom of assembly is subject to strict restrictions and requires police permits. Non-Singaporeans are generally prohibited from participating in or attending public assemblies that are considered political or sensitive. A 2017 amendment to the Public Order Act increased the authorities' discretion to ban public meetings and barred foreign nationals from organising, funding, or observing gatherings that could be used for a political purpose. The Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act of 2018 granted the home affairs minister and police enhanced authority in the event of a "serious incident," which could include peaceful protests.

⁶⁸ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2022-12-30)

⁶⁹ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2022-12-30)

⁷⁰ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2022-12-30)

Authorities can punish activists for holding unauthorised events, including small "assemblies." ⁷¹

Regarding the judicial parts of the civil liberties, top judges are appointed by the president on the advice of the prime minister, raising concerns about judicial independence. The Internal Security Act from the colonial era permits warrantless searches, arrests, and indefinite detention. Even though the law forbids it, minorities may experience discrimination in the workplace. Women have the same legal rights as men, but there is no legal ban on gender-based discrimination. The LGBT+ community faces significant legal obstacles, including a law criminalising consensual sex between adult men. This law is not actively enforced, but the courts have upheld its constitutionality.⁷²

The (un)Level Playing Field

The playing field is deemed unfair when: The incumbent party and politicians are routinely benefited at the expense of the opposition. The opposition's capacity to organise and participate in elections is severely hampered. State institutions are frequently utilised for political purposes.⁷³

We have already seen several of these in the first two instances, but to add to it further. In Singapore the official campaign period is only nine days. And the government has and uses the ability to call snap elections. ⁷⁴

The opposition's voice is also seen as in its core being incompetent and having a lack of intelligent authority. They are frequently bashed by the PAP and the picture that the PAP wants the electorate wants the public to have of the opposition is that they would not be able to represent them and are overall inadequate. These measures hinder the opposition's ability to establish a strong party leadership and

⁷¹ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2022-12-30)

⁷² Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2022-12-30)

⁷³ Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 9–10.

⁷⁴ Morgenbesser, 2017, p. 214.

compete effectively in elections. As a result, the ruling party is often seen as the best choice for voters due to its monopoly on talent and maintenance of order through the suppression of the opposition.⁷⁵

The PAP also uses different methods of co-optation where several of them use the states institutions like extensive public housing programs for supporters and a social welfare programme that finances both education and basic medical care. But these things are on the whim of the PAP, they have threatened to withdraw this support to deter people from vote for the opposition.⁷⁶

5.1.2 The use of Other Authoritarian Tools

Here I will shortly bring up the other authoritarian tools used, but a longer discussion will follow below.

One of the more important things was to choose a good electable and trustworthy successor. Six candidates competed internally in the PAP for the position of Singapore's next prime minister, all of whom were men of Chinese ancestry with comparable ethnic, social, and professional backgrounds. The selection process began in 2016. 2018 saw the selection of Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat as the new leader after a two-year elimination process. His appointment was questioned, and he came under fire for a string of embarrassing gaffes that led to a dismal showing in the 2020 General Election campaign. Heng resigned as a result in April 2021, leaving no clear choice for the position of leader and the leadership selection process in limbo. After more than five years of painstaking labour and publicity, the method has received a lot of criticism.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Bertram Yongjum Lim, 2013, “A Cautionary Tale: Diagnosing Singapore’s One-Party State”, BA Thesis, Wesleyan University, pp. 42-43.

⁷⁶ Morgenbesser, 2017, p. 210.

⁷⁷ Barr, Michael D., “Singapore’s Succession Headache”, *The Diplomat*, 2022-03-01, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/singapores-succession-headache/>, (accessed 2023-01-01)

Corruption and bribery are one form of informal institution that often existed in both authoritarian and competitive authoritarian states. Singapore has on the other hand been applauded for its low corruption and bribery. They however have a too close relationship in between the private and public sector in some cases. As an example, was the Prime Minister's wife CEO of a sovereign wealth fund and company with government links.⁷⁸

The dual game is definitely being played in Singapore both from the regime and the opposition. Though it's more visible from the government's side then the oppositions in that the government clearly cares for the election, but at the same time have no trouble using less than savoury techniques to repress the public, as discussed earlier. The opposition though has a harder time, sometimes because of the regime's efforts, an example that I gave was that the opposition could stage mass protests. But the law regarding public assembly is pretty tough, especially during protests. The Home Affairs Minister and police are given extra authority under the Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act of 2018 when a "major incident" occurs, which might be anything from a terrorist attack to a nonviolent demonstration. Officials may be permitted to use deadly force during these occurrences and to halt information collection, news sharing, and online communication in the impacted area. Even if the occurrence hasn't happened yet but is anticipated to happen or is threatened, these exceptional powers may still be deployed.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2023-01-01)

⁷⁹ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022 – Singapore" (accessed 2023-01-01)

5.2 Discussion

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made it clear in 2001 that in the country's representational democracy, the citizens' only duty is to elect the government, while the executive branch is responsible for governing and choosing what is in the best interests for the general public.⁸⁰ And that mentality is certainly visible when looking closer at it as we just have done. The research question was regarding why the people of Singapore continue to legitimise the ruling party? And my thought was that it was because the ruling party had with great success been using competitive authoritarianism to give people what they think that they want. Keep that thought in mind, we will be returning to it soon.

In the analysis we showed that of the three big things that a state needs to violate to be seen as a competitive authoritarian state did it did in some way violate all three of them. The elections are free, but not fair. There is a real risk of being harassed, wrongfully disqualified, or discredited just for being an active politician in the opposition. And the PAP are actively using the state's resources against the opposition. Civil liberties are protected to a degree, but some of the more fundamentally important ones like a free press and academia and the freedom of assembly and speech are heavily restricted. Combining that with an opaque judiciary with questionable independence and the ability to warrantless search, arrests, and indefinite hold people and the picture doesn't look too bright. Then we have the inherently unlevel playing field. Were among things the opposition barely gets time to campaign and push their message. And when they get the chance to do it the PAP will have spent so much time into delegitimising them so the ordinary person might not even trust them. Further add to this the co-optation that the PAP uses to hold its citizens close and loyal. And suddenly is it hard to not see Singapore and the PAP as competitive authoritarian.

⁸⁰ Bertram Yongjum Lim, 2013, Wesleyan University, p. 41.

But how do the people react to this? Are they quietly seething, accepting the status quo but just waiting for a big enough reason to revolt? Or have the tools of competitive authoritarianism worked so good so that that isn't the case? According to a 2006 survey conducted by the Asian Barometer Survey, a majority of Singaporean respondents, 83%, believed that the ruling party, the PAP, was credible. This contrasted with the opposition parties, the Worker's Party, and the Singapore Democratic Party, which were viewed as credible by 48% and 16% of respondents, respectively. Additionally, 89% of respondents expressed confidence in the PAP-led national government. Even more surprising (or maybe expected) is that a majority of respondents, 82%, expressed satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Singapore. And 84% of respondents believed that the current PAP government is generally democratic.⁸¹

And if that is not telling then maybe the statistic that only 12 percent of the respondents in the ABS valued democracy over economic growth⁸² something that shows how successful the PAP have been in their work of convincing the public of just what Lee Hsien Loong said in 2001, government's responsibility is to rule and decide what is in the public interest.⁸³

5.2.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations to consider. It uses survey data, which may be subject to bias and limitations in terms of sample selection and self-reporting. The scope of the study is limited to the use of competitive authoritarianism in Singapore, and there may be other factors influencing the ruling party's legitimacy. The political landscape in Singapore is complex and multi-faceted, and this study may not fully capture all the nuances and complexities at play. Additionally, there may

⁸¹ Bertram Yongjum Lim, 2013, Wesleyan University, pp.14-15.

⁸² Bertram Yongjum Lim, 2013, Wesleyan University, p. 17.

⁸³ Bertram Yongjum Lim, 2013, Wesleyan University, p. 41.

be alternative explanations for the ruling party's continued legitimacy that are not explored in this study.

6 Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it appears that Singapore can be considered a competitive authoritarian state. The country's elections are not completely free and fair, as the ruling party has been accused of using unfair tactics and limiting the opposition's access to funding, media, and state institutions.

Civil liberties in Singapore are only partially protected and the independent media and opposition groups face intimidation and repression. The government has been accused of using "legal repression" to selectively enforce laws against the opposition and limiting their ability to organize and challenge the government. Lastly, Singapore's level playing field is not completely equal, as the ruling party has an advantage over the opposition due to its control over various institutions.

Overall, it appears that the Singaporean regime uses a variety of tools from the "competitive authoritarian toolbox" to maintain its power and achieve its otherwise surprising results. The ruling party has developed the use of competitive authoritarianism to distort the public's perception of the democratic principle that the government should act in the best interest of the people. This is done solely to maintain their own power.

Further research could focus on the role of the judiciary in Singapore's competitive authoritarian regime and how the government has used the legal system to selectively target opposition through selective enforcement of laws. This research could also examine the impact of such actions on the fairness of elections and the overall political landscape in Singapore. Additionally, a comparison with other competitive authoritarian regimes could provide insight into common characteristics and challenges faced by and because of these types of governments.

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