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Calibrated coercion and the maintenance of

hegemony in Singapore

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Calibrated coercion and the maintenance of hegemony in Singapore

Authoritarian rule is often regarded as simple for states to execute and unworthy of analysts to study. Far more attention has been devoted to the challenge of instituting and consolidating democracy. One reason for this imbalance is obvious: there is clearly a greater need for intellectual capital and policy advice to help fledgling democracies than would-be dictatorships entrench their chosen forms of government. However, the normative preference for democracy is not the only reason for gaps in our understanding of authoritarian rule. Another factor is conceptual. Authoritarian rule cannot be studied without focusing on the state, and the state was for too long neglected by social science. Classical Marxism saw the state merely as an instrument of the ruling economic class, while the pluralist tradition in American political science viewed it as a kind of referee in a game played by competing interest groups. These trends required a conscious effort at "bringing the state back in" as an autonomous agent in political studies (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985). Soon after, however, the collapse of the Soviet empire and a new wave of democratisation engendered the assumption that authoritarian rule was merely a transitional phase, a detour en route to inevitable freedoms. While the early "end of history" thesis has given way to a more nuanced acknowledgement that there may be multiple democratic destinations, not all of them Western-style and liberal (see, for example, Diamond 2002), authoritarianism continues to be neglected as a form of rule in its own right.

This essay is a modest effort to redress that balance, by taking seriously authoritarian rule – or, more precisely, coercion by the state. It argues that, from the point of view of a regime wanting to perpetuate its dominance, there are more intelligent and less intelligent ways to apply coercion. Some readers may find it hard to stomach this line of argument, believing that no coercion is good coercion. To such readers, what follows may occasionally seem like an apology, or prescription, for certain kinds of authoritarianism. On the contrary, the normative thrust of this essay is directed at democratisation. While no counter-hegemonic strategy is spelt out here, any such strategy must include a sophisticated understanding of what makes certain kinds authoritarian rule endure – the better to resist and challenge them. This essay is aimed at that kind of understanding.

Few instances of authoritarian rule demand deeper analysis than Singapore. Although the city state is tiny, with a population of less than five million, it provides an exceptionally

instructive case study. Simply put, no existing regime can match its record of political stability combined with socio-economic development. It has had no changeover of ruling party since 1959, and virtually no violent encounters between state and society for decades. Its upward mobility in socio-economic terms has been equally uninterrupted. Today, Singapore enjoys First World standards of living in most respects, while the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) shows no hint of weakening its hold on political power. This achievement has reportedly attracted the attention of officials from China, Vietnam and other states who, unwilling to accept the liberal prescription that market liberalisation can only be successful if accompanied by political competition, find in Singapore a model for having one's cake and eating it too. Singapore is also worthy of examination as a single-case study because the longevity of the regime allows one to analyse changes over time. As will be shown, Singapore's political stability belies important shifts in coercive strategy, which may help account for the endurance of the PAP.

Looking in particular at the way it has managed the press, this essay will argue that part of the PAP's success formula has been its ability to choose the right tools of repression for the right job. This is not to deny the importance of two other pillars of PAP hegemony – sound economic policy-making, and a compelling ideology of nation-building – about which much has already been written (see, for example, Chua 1995 and George 2000). It is not argued here that calibrated coercion is a sufficient explanation of PAP hegemony, but that it is a necessary and hitherto poorly specified aspect of the total picture. Although hegemony in the Gramscian sense is understood to comprise both coercion as well as consent (Anderson 1976), disproportionate attention has been paid to the processes of forging ideological consensus. Coercion is rarely problematised. David Held (1989) has provided a useful seven-point scale that marks various kinds of compliance on a continuum:

1. Coercion: People have no choice but to accept it.
2. Tradition: Alternatives have never occurred to people.
3. Apathy: People don't care one way or another.
4. Pragmatic acquiescence: People know it's not ideal, but it seems like fate.
5. Instrumental acceptance: It's not satisfactory, but it gives people some long-term benefit.
6. Normative agreement: People believe it is the right thing to do in the circumstances.
7. Ideal normative agreement: People believe it is the ideal outcome.

Most analyses of Singapore accept that all seven modes apply there. Without denying the importance of the six others, this essay looks inside the black box of coercion, to understand one particularly successful model for its application.

Hegemony and the coercive continuum

The state, according to Max Weber, is "that human community which within a defined territory successfully claims for itself the *monopoly of legitimate physical force*" (Whimster 2004:131). "The state," he carries on, "is the sole source for the 'right' to exercise violence." This description of the state is taken to even more unflattering depths by Charles Tilly, who describes states as the ultimate example of organised crime: they are "quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy" (Tilly 1985:169). This portrait of war makers and state makers as "coercive and self-seeking entrepreneurs" is much truer to history than other common images, such as the idea of a social contract, or of a market in which states offer services to willing consumers, or a society whose shared values generate a certain form of government, he argues. Echoing Weber, Tilly notes that the violence produced by states is distinguished from everyone else's violence by legitimacy. Historically, and even today, the distinctions were fluid and not always clear, between state makers and bandits, militia and mercenaries. "Eventually, the personnel of states purveyed violence on a larger scale, more effectively, more efficiently, with wider assent from their subject populations, and with readier collaboration from neighboring authorities than did the personnel of other organizations" (Tilly 1985:173).

Although Weber's definition is in wide circulation, the processes of ideological consensus have attracted more scholarly attention than the use of violence. This is not unexpected, since, as Gramsci observed, what is remarkable about capitalist societies is the way the ruling class has dominated without routine recourse to violence, and indeed usually with the consent of the ruled. Another reason for the relative lack of interest in coercion is perhaps the sense that it does not need to be problematised, since there is nothing particularly refined or complicated about the application of brute force.

Some social theorists have indicated otherwise. Hannah Arendt, in *On Violence* (1970), dismisses the notion that violence is merely the most flagrant manifestation of power. Power and violence (together with strength, force and authority) tend to be treated as synonymous terms because they are all means by which man rules over man, she notes. This tendency blinds us to

important political realities. Power can use violence, but it cannot be based on violence. "No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed," she notes (Arendt 1970:50). This is because power corresponds to the human ability to act in concert; it belongs to a group and exists only as long as the group coheres. "Single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully," she says (p.50-51).

> Even the totalitarian ruler, who chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers. … Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use. … Everything depends on the power behind the violence. (p.49-50)

What power needs is legitimacy, and legitimacy is what is lost when violence is misapplied. "To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power" (p.54). Thus, violence results in impotence. Violence needs to be "backed and restrained by power", lest it destroys power (p.54). In the extreme, in totalitarian police states based on terror, the state turns against supporters as well as against enemies, because it is afraid of all power, including the power of friends; it begins "to devour its own children, when yesterday's executioner becomes today's victim" (p.55). Therefore, even though violence, power and authority often appear together, they are not the same. Indeed, she says, "Power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears when power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance." (p56) She adds: "Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power" (p53).

Michel Foucault, whose name is often bandied about as representing the bleak view that power is everywhere, is also sensitive to the idea that violence exacts a cost on its perpetrators. "If you are too violent, you risk provoking revolts," he says (1980:155). Monarchical power operated on the principle of example. Lacking the capacity to deal with all criminals, the few who were arrested were punished spectacularly to frighten others. Such use of violence was costly in proportion to its results. "A great expenditure of violence is made which ultimately only had the force of an example. It even becomes necessary to multiply violence, but precisely by doing so one multiplies revolts" (p.155). Hence, the need to move from a reliance on physical violence, to a system of surveillance.

The idea that there are selfish, rational reasons for even dictators to exercise self-restraint in their use of violence has also been explored by Wintrobe (1998) and Olson (2000). Wintrobe criticises what he calls the "command model" that is used implicitly in many discussions of power – "a model in which the only instrument of power available to the dictator is commands backed by sanctions" (p. 38). According to this model:

> Policies are decided at the top – by the dictator, with the help of a small group of advisers – and then imposed on a hapless population. The population acquiesces either as a result of fear, on the one hand, or brainwashing, indoctrination, and thought control, on the other. However, the explanatory power of these concepts – their capacity to explain changes in the level of repression, for example, or to explain why regimes rise and fall – is not very large (p. 333).

He points out that repression – restrictions backed by severe sanctions – engenders the "Dictator's Dilemma": the dictator can never tell whether his subjects genuinely worship him. Simply intensifying the repression is no help; it only increases the likelihood that subjects will hide their true feelings and go out of their way to persuade him that he is loved. Bureaucrats are unlikely to pull the wool from his eyes because of the risk that they will be punished for being the bearers of bad news. The all-round lack of trust results in a mutual communication or signalling problem: "Mutual signaling is more costly between dictators and their subjects than between the government and the people in a democracy" (p. 25). Therefore, the rational dictator will not depend exclusively on repression to ensure exchange. The sovereign will also try to cultivate loyalty, by distributing rents, for example, in a way that "overpays" supporters.

Olson arrives at similar conclusions from a different angle. It is in a dictator's self-interest to practice self-restraint rather than slaughtering the goose that lays the golden egg, he argues. He observes that even criminals have a stake in their society. They would not want to be surrounded by poverty, since there would be less to steal. That an individual criminal would nonetheless be willing to strip a victim of all his belongings is explained by the fact that the criminal's stake in his society's prosperity, as well as his impact on it, is so small that he can ignore it. The calculation changes when the criminal is, say, a Mafia family with a monopoly of crime in a well-defined neighbourhood. Then, it becomes in the gang's own self-interest to restrain its criminal activity – even if there was no risk of getting caught. Unrestrained crime would make

business unprofitable, or provoke out-migration. The neighbourhood would then generate less income, and the gang would have less to cream off.

> Indeed, the Mafia family with a true and continuing monopoly on crime in a neighborhood will not commit any robberies at all. … [I]t will gain from promoting business profitability and safe residential life there. Thus, the secure Mafia family will maximize its take by selling protection – both against the crime it would commit itself (if not paid) as well as that which would be committed by others (if it did not keep out other criminals (p. 5).

The experience of 1920s warlord-controlled China offers a similar lesson, Olson says. Villagers were victimised by bandits, some of whom settled down in their midst. The people seemed to prefer these stationary bandits who taxed them relentlessly, compared with being plundered by roving bandits who would descend upon them occasionally but soon depart. Olson's explanation for this preference is that the stationary bandit, like the Mafia family, knew that he was better off limiting his predations. He even had an incentive to provide public goods that would make his territory more productive, such as irrigation schemes and police protection. "It follows that the familiar metaphor of the predatory state is inadequate, even for autocracies with utterly selfish leaders," Olson concludes (p. 11). For Olson, democracy is not the sole factor explaining self-enforcing limits on the exercise of power. Equally important is the scope of the interest that the powerful have in the welfare of the society. Groups with narrow interests, like the petty criminal or the roving bandit, show little restraint. Those with encompassing interests, like the Mafia family or the stationary bandit, may rationally limit their predations.

The empirical relationship between states' use of coercion and political stability has been examined most thoroughly within the field of conflict studies. Employing large-scale cross-national regressions and in-depth comparative case studies, scholars have treated states' use of violence both as a dependent variable influenced by factors such as democracy and economic development, and as an independent variable affecting levels of social protest. There is wide agreement that the processes are complex, interactive, and as yet unyielding of a definitive picture. One consistent finding is that the amount of violence applied by states on their citizens is negatively correlated with the level of democracy (see, for example, Henderson 1991, Gupta et al 1993, Davenport 1995) – though this sounds somewhat like a truism if not a tautology, since democracy is a system designed for peaceful resolution of differences. Governments are more

accountable and responsive to the public in democracies than in non-democracies, and opposition groups are more likely to trust political channels than to resort to methods that might provoke the use of state force. Transitional governments are also more likely to tolerate dissent simply because they lack the institutional capacity to respond to every threat (Davenport 1995). Economic prosperity and sustained economic growth also appear to be associated with contexts that inhibit state violence, while sharp group differences in economic or ethnic terms can be difficult to manage peacefully.

More difficult to pin down is the relationship between state actions and the tactics of opposition groups. Clearly, there is an interaction between the two, as both sides pick tactics based on the expected response, which is in turn based on past behaviours. For example, Moore (2000) finds that states switch from accommodation to repression if the former resulted in increased dissent. Conversely, if repression meets with more dissent, it will be substituted with accommodation. Gartner (1996) suggests that the benefits of repression increase as opponents' demands grow further from the status quo. These benefits are weighed against costs of repression, both domestic and international. The costs – in terms of domestic support and foreign aid, for example – depend on how justified and proportionate a forceful response is seen to be. Too weak a response also bears a reputational cost, since states are looked to as ultimate preservers of order and security within their territories.

All the above analyses share certain basic assumptions. First, rulers and ruled within dictatorships – no less than in democracies – are assumed to be self-interested and rational, in that they try to pick the best means of reaching their goals. Second, the coercive methods available to states span a wide range, varying in the actual amount of force used. Although practically all state actions, including administrative functions such as taxation, are ultimately underwritten by the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, there are conceptually meaningful distinctions to be drawn between, say, imposing a fine on an opponent, imprisoning him, or triggering his "disappearance". Third, different means of coercion are associated with different costs and benefits at different times. Each challenge is associated with an equilibrium response. A state's failure to calibrate its coercion accordingly will result in excessive cost, in terms of domestic and foreign support, and securing the conditions for economic growth.

The Singapore context

Singapore was a British colony until 1963, when it became a state within the Malaysian federation for two years. It has been an independent republic since 1965. It a parliamentary system based on the Westminster model, with members of parliament directly elected and the prime minister drawn from the party that controls the legislature. The prime minister is required to call general elections after, at most, five years of government. Opposition parties are legal. Although the PAP has subjected themselves to elections at the constitutionally-mandated intervals, it has not seen the need to limit its power substantially between those elections. Singapore is not constituted as a liberal democracy with deep civil liberties and failsafe checks against the abuse of government power. The executive dominates the legislative and judicial branches of the state, partly in response to a history of political instability. The post-war colonial period was marked by fierce communist insurgency that was forcibly put down through various emergency measures. The non-communist nationalists who led their countries to independence thus inherited with both the tools for controlling insurgency and a hypersensitivity towards organised dissent. Modern Singapore has also been shaped by ethnic riots, which fostered a premium on order and strong government. Furthermore, Singapore's expulsion from the Malaysian federation in August 1965, together with its tiny size, has given its leaders an acute sense of national vulnerability, which they believe can be compensated for only through discipline and order.

Singapore has retained and enhanced various illiberal laws that it inherited from the colonial administration. These include provisions allowing detention without trial, a licensing system for the press, discretionary registration of societies, and the requirement of permits for public gatherings. Independent Singapore was home to one of the world's longest-serving political prisoners, alleged communist Chia Thye Poh, who was detained for more than 25 years.

Singapore's hybrid political system has been labelled everything from authoritarian to semi-democratic by political scientists. Other commentators and critics have been less complimentary, describing Singapore as totalitarian or a dictatorship. Larry Diamond classifies Singapore as an electoral autocracy – a state that has "elections without democracy" (Diamond 2002). Underlining its exceptional stability, Diamond notes that of the seven electoral autocracies that existed around the world in the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore is one of only two (the other being Malaysia that has survived as such. That stability is evident not only in the

political system as a whole, but also at the level of government. Singapore's ruling party has never lost power since 1959. Opposition parties have not occupied more than four seats in parliament since 1966. Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, led the government for 31 years, and his successor, Goh Chok Tong, for 14 years. Political successions, including to current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2004, have been carefully planned and always on the PAP's own terms.

In trying to account for the stability of Singapore's political system and the longevity of the PAP, Held's (1989) scale comes in useful. The PAP is certainly backed by a significant degree of consent on the part of the ruled. Part of this is accounted for by the people's "instrumental acquiescence", based on their not-unfounded faith that the governments will continue to deliver rising standards of living. In addition, there is also evidence of a normative consensus at work, maintained through the state's ideological domination. The PAP has drawn upon the legitimating power of elections, which are at least free and fair enough to attract the continued participation of all major opposition parties. Consent is also constructed around the idea of nation-building, which evokes a sense of collective purpose, to fight common threats and work towards common goals. What the PAP calls "good governance" and its tangible results – rapid and equitable socio-economic development – add to Singaporeans' genuine and freely-given support for the ruling party.

Coercion, nevertheless, remains one of the pillars of PAP dominance. There has been no move to repeal Singapore's most repressive laws, such as the Internal Security Act, which allows arrest without warrant and detention with trial. On a 5-point repression index, Henderson (1991) rates Singapore as a "2", together with other countries where there is "a limited amount of imprisonment for non-violent political activity. However, few persons are affected, torture and beating are exceptional. … Political murder is rare" (p.127). The array of repressive tools at the government's disposal remains large. What has changed is the manner in which those tools are used. Generally speaking, there has been a shift from more spectacular punishments such as imprisonment, towards more behind-the-scenes controls. Economic sanctions are favoured over those that violate the sanctity of the individual. And, controls are targeted at limited numbers of producers and organisers of dissent, rather than at ordinary citizens. In short, coercion is increasingly calibrated for maximum effectiveness at minimum cost. The PAP's press controls provide a good example.

Calibrated coercion and the Singapore press

According to Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of the press system, "Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government" (Lee 2000: 218). The PAP's press system is one of dozens of authoritarian models around the world, in which states claim that the suspension of press freedom is in the public interest. What makes Singapore's system exceptional is its sheer longevity and stability, maintained with declining levels of overt repression. The last time that Singapore witnessed the full force of the government's coercive might against the press was in 1971, when the Lee government acted against three newspapers. In late April of that year, Lee Kuan Yew accused the Chinese-language press of stoking up chauvinism in its coverage of the decline of Chinese-medium schools. On May 2, four senior *Nanyang Siang Pau* executives were detained under the Internal Security Act. Shortly after, the English-language *Eastern Sun* was accused of receiving communist funds from Hongkong. Its senior staff quit, and the paper closed down. Lee Kuan Yew accused *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *Eastern Sun* and *Singapore Herald* of involvement in "black operations" against Singapore's security. On May 28, the *Herald*'s licence was withdrawn and its senior expatriate journalists expelled from the country. It had been launched only 10 months earlier, but in its brief life it "attracted quite a following, with its lively, entertaining, refreshingly irreverent approach", writes the historian Mary Turnbull (1995: 291).

Lee maintains that he was acting against "black operations" (2000: 215-218). Others remember it simply as an act of flagrant censorship against the politically feisty *Herald*. Another interpretation regards the *Eastern Sun* and the *Herald* as having been dragged into the web by *Nanyang Siang Pau*'s intransigence – showing how raw coercion can spin out of control. The government may have miscalculated when it assumed that the Chinese paper would be silenced by the arrests. Instead, it continued to challenge the arrests in its columns, precipitating something of a crisis of credibility for the government (Polsky 1971). The paper The *Eastern Sun* was sacrificed as a "red herring", Polsky says – highlighting its admittedly dubious funding would help persuade Singaporeans of the threat of Chinese communist subversion. Attacking an English-language paper had the additional advantage of appearing even-handed to the Chinese-educated, according to this theory. Mary Turnbull notes that the following years did bring forth "revelations about the role of foreign slush funds in infiltrating the regional press", but concludes

that "there was no evidence that either the *Eastern Sun* or the *Herald* were being influenced by their backers" (1995: 293).

What is also clear is the effect that the actions had. "The events of May 1971 sent shock waves through Singapore and raised concerns about press freedom," Turnbull says (1995: 291). The *Herald*'s managing director Jimmy Hahn said that if its permit were withdrawn, Mr Lee would be "guilty of premeditated murder of a newspaper" (quoted in Seow 1998: 85). Hyperbole, perhaps, but not ineffective in provoking a sense of moral outrage among readers who had developed emotional ties with the newspaper. The public relations cost of the government's threats included a "Save the Herald" fund-raising campaign that attracted university students and other educated Singaporeans.

It was not just the young republic's democratic credentials that were sullied by the events of May 1971, but also – and perhaps more seriously – its reputation as an investor-friendly economy. The *Herald*'s management pointed out that, on top of violating press freedom, the government had decided "to interfere in a commercial enterprise in an unprecedented manner" (quoted in Seow 1998: 83). Speaking to the Hongkong Foreign Corresondents Club, Polsky (1971) said that some foreign businessmen were concerned about "arbitrary Singapore Government interference in the private sector". The government may have won its battle against the press, but such collateral damage had to hurt at a time when its reputation for economic management was still a work in progress.

As a result of the tumult of 1971, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP appear to have decided that the colonial legacy of reserve powers was inadequate to their nation-building project. That legacy – allowing discretionary licensing and preventive detention – guaranteed that the government would win any fight with any newspaper or individual journalist. For a state content to rule by force, such laws would certainly suffice. For a party with a hegemonic mission, however, recourse to these instruments had a cost, demeaning the consensual aspect of its rule and exposing the raw coercive power beneath. Far better to win without a fight than to fight and win. It was surely no coincidence that the PAP introduced new press laws soon after it wielded the old ones in 1971's unprecedented orgy of aggression against the press – which, while certainly effective, also generated much public debate and disquiet.

The PAP applied the lessons learnt from that affair in new press laws enacted in 1974. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) retained discretionary licensing as its cornerstone, but introduced unique legislative innovations the genius of which remains under-

recognised and under-estimated. In addition to a new ban on foreign ownership – which many countries already had – the NPPA made it mandatory for newspaper companies to be publicly listed, and to create management shares to be held by government nominees. Public listing – with ordinary shareholders limited to a 3 percent stake after a 1977 amendment to the NPPA – meant that Singapore would never again see the likes of the Lee Rubber family that was behind the recalcitrant *Nanyang Siang Pau*. "I do not subscribe to the Western practice that allows a wealthy press baron to decide what voters should read day after day," Lee Kuan Yew would later say (2000: 218).

Management shares provided a mechanism for the government to influence a newspaper's workings without interfering with ownership, which could be left to the stock market. Management shares were allocated to banks and other establishment figures. "They would remain politically neutral and protect stability and growth because of their business interests," Lee said (2000: 218). Management shares have 200 times the voting rights as ordinary shares, giving them effective control of the board and top editorial positions. This is the system under which Singapore Press Holdings operates and prospers to this day.

Other authoritarian governments with a strong belief in their need to set the direction for the media have invariably been tempted to take over ownership of newspapers. The Chinese Communist Party is the paramount example. Those that do not, operate a violently repressive system of censorship and routinised attacks on the press. Critics of the PAP sometimes liken it to such totalitarian or dictatorial regimes, but the comparison is profoundly misleading, underestimating the sophisticated calibration that has been built into press controls. The PAP has achieved what possibly no other authoritarian state has done: effective, near-watertight supervision of the press without either nationalising ownership of the media or brutalising journalists.

The legal framework is only part of the secret. More important is the quality of political judgment that has maintained the press system in a dynamic equilibrium that balances the political interests of the PAP government, the profit motives of publishers, the professional and pecuniary needs of journalists, and the public's demand for information and analysis. This is not to say that all these stakeholders are happy with the system, all of the time. Rather, it is to point out that none of them has been so unhappy as to opt out of it. Consumers of news in Singapore, the main victims of the lack of press freedom, complain about the standard of news media, and are concerned about their credibility. However, they have not been sufficiently outraged to, for

example, boycott the mainstream media or to flee in droves to alternative websites that are much more independent of government control – both of which have happened in Malaysia (George 2005). Indeed, as Garry Rodan observes, media policy in Singapore may have been partly influenced by a conscious desire "to pre-empt the situation that has occurred in Malaysia where the government-controlled domestic media lost much of their appeal and credibility" (2004: 95).

It is also striking that critics of the press in Singapore blame the press itself more than they do the underlying system of laws and regulations. The situation is quite unlike 1971, when, as the "Save the Herald" campaign demonstrated, critics viewed newspapers as victims of government repression. Today, the public is more inclined to assign blame to the press itself. This is the direct – and, arguably, intended – result of an NPPA regime that has shifted the emphasis from a very public licensing-and-censorship model to one based on behind-the-scenes self-censorship. The traditionally political relationship between press and society has been reframed as a producer-consumer one.

Like all authoritarian governments, the PAP coveted the media's power as a propaganda tool. But unlike most authoritarian rulers, Lee Kuan Yew appreciated that this power depended on the media's credibility, which would be crushed by a state that grasps it too lustily. Thus, when retired senior civil servant and Lee loyalist S.R. Nathan was given the job of executive chairman of the *Straits Times* group in 1982, Lee reminded him that the flagship newspaper had a 140-year history and should be treated like a china bowl (Turnbull 1995). Self-restraint in the use of its regulatory muscle has been a vital part of the PAP's formula for long-term management of the press, post-1971.

Calibrated coercion provides journalists with periodic reminders of just who is boss, but also enough leeway to persuade enough of them that there is still a place in Singapore for the professional practice of journalism, and that the space is expanding. Thus, Cheong Yip Seng, editor-in-chief of the *Straits Times* group, has written that the newspapers have become "a little more confident, assertive, and critical". In an article entitled "The Singapore Press: How Free, How Credible?", Cheong acknowledges that the government has "enormous reserve powers over ownership and control of editorial policy". But he argues that despite a history of poor press relations, the government "does not want a docile press" but "a livelier, more credible press with high professional standards". Instances of government interference through "telephone calls to influence treatment of news or to reprimand… are much fewer nowadays", he adds. He takes

comfort from the fact that a new generation of political leaders is emerging, who know they need a more credible mass media to communicate with a more sophisticated electorate.

This analysis would be considered standard fare from an SPH editor *circa* 2005. It was in fact written 24 years earlier, in 1981. That the mixture of realism and hope has hardly changed since then underlines the resilience of the PAP system of press management. Realism dismissed as foolhardy any dream of changing the media system's wider political framework, while hope reassures journalists that there is a professional role for them even within the current framework.

The authoritarian impulse behind Singapore's press system is as old as the hills. What is more novel is the PAP's astute use of global forces pushed by capitalist liberal democracies to reinforce a profoundly illiberal system. While less clever regimes assumed that they had to subvert the press completely in order to assure their preferred results, Lee Kuan Yew recognised that he merely needed to tweak its incentive structure and install the right barriers. This strategy worked because journalism's main impetus by the late 20th century was commerce, not ideology. Worldwide, the press, even when free and left to its own devices, has applied itself more strenuously to the seeking of profits than to campaigning for political change. The present reading of Singapore's press history corroborates Garry Rodan's (2004) thesis, that information control by authoritarian regimes is not necessarily inconsistent with market development. Singapore, in his view, may represent a viable alternative political model for capitalist development, rather than an exception to the rule. Rodan observes that markets are highly seductive for profit-seeking companies, leading to "widespread self-censorship to avoid confrontation with authoritarian regimes and protect access to those markets" (2004: 16).

Managing the Internet

Calibrated coercion extends to the PAP's formula for managing new communication technologies such as the internet. Regulators adopted what they called a "light touch" approach. The internet was adopted within an ambitious information technology vision conceived as part of a national strategy for survival in global economic competition. When citizens started using the medium for forms of expression that would not be tolerated in the mainstream media, the government's first response was to join the contest of ideas in cyberspace. For example, PAP activists began posting pro-government views on websites and bulletin boards to counter what they felt were unbalanced, ill-informed and irresponsible opinions circulating in cyberspace.

Reliance on the marketplace of ideas did not last long. Indeed, Singapore was one of the first countries in the world to devise internet content regulations. Parliament enacted a new broadcasting law in 1994, formally extending the government's jurisdiction to electronic communication. The authorities followed up July 1996 with new regulations specifically for the internet. They required internet service providers to route traffic through proxy servers so that they could filter out sites that regulators found objectionable.

The compulsory use of proxy servers is an example of how the "architecture" of the internet can be modified by regulators, contrary to the old assumption that cyberspace cannot be governed (Lessig 1999). Chalaby (2000) points out that such forms of internet censorship demonstrate how the means of curbing freedom of speech can – for the first time in the history of communication – be technologically integrated within the medium. This makes control more efficient and less visible.

The other main feature of the regulations was a "class licence" system. This introduced into new media the old principle of licensing. However, instead of having to apply for individual licences, internet content providers were deemed automatically licensed as a class, and could therefore operate as before. Sites that sought public attention and dealt with what were deemed to be more sensitive areas, principally religion and politics, had to meet an additional requirement. They would have to register with the regulatory agency. Registration required the editorial team to sign a declaration saying that they would take "full responsibility for the contents on the website(s) and… all reasonable steps to ensure that such contents comply with the laws of Singapore."

Indeed, Singapore's mid-1996 announcement was greeted with vociferous protest from the internet's passionate early adopters. International news coverage was largely negative, associating the moves with Singapore's reputation for draconian rule. In response, the authorities said that the proxy server barrier was intended only for pornography and not for political sites – a distinction that has not been forthcoming in the regulation of other media. The government also appointed a National Internet Advisory Committee chaired by a scientist. As a result of the committee's recommendations, the regulator revised the Internet Code of Practice to clarify the responsibilities of licensees. The regulators also amended their content guidelines. Their original list of discouraged material included content that jeopardised public security or national defence; excited disaffection against the Government; or undermined public confidence in the administration of justice – terms borrowed from existing legislation. These items were expunged

from the new code, placing the emphasis squarely on sexual content and material harmful to racial and religious harmony.

The regulator, the Media Development Authority or MDA, describes its content regulation as taking a "light touch" approach. Its website goes to the extent of addressing so-called myths about its regulations. For example:

> Myth: MDA is stifling religious and political discussion on the Internet. Fact: MDA does not stop religious and political bodies from putting up web sites. We ask that they register with us as content providers to emphasize the need to be responsible in what they say. This is important, given the multi-racial and multi-religious nature of our society, and is consistent with existing regulations pertaining to print and other electronic material. ("Myths and Facts about MDA and the Internet")

Singapore's first prosecution of an individual engaged in political expression on the internet took place in November 2001, more than seven years after the medium's commercial launch. A man was arrested for allegedly posting an inflammatory article on the Singaporeans For Democracy website. Arguing that the prime minister had entered a polling place in violation of election laws in 1997, his article urged Singaporeans "to break the same law" in the forthcoming elections. The writer's act was classified as an attempt to incite disobedience to the law that is likely to lead to a breach of peace, an offence punishable by up to three years imprisonment. The authorities later dropped the charges, saying that he was mentally ill. The case confirmed fears that the regulators' "light-touch" policy did not mean that they were not watching online politics closely, or that they would refrain from removing the kid gloves from time to time. A second case involved Fateha.com, a site purporting to be the genuine voice of Singapore's Muslim community. The authorities threatened to charge its editor with criminal defamation for articles critical of senior establishment figures, but he fled to Australia before investigations were complete.

Although Singapore's internet regime can hardly be described as liberal, the government's claim of "light touch" regulation is not entirely hollow either. Ten years after the internet was introduced, no political site has been blocked, even though this would be a technically and administratively straightforward move. Singapore's approach stands in sharp contrast to that of China, where thousands of sites are blocked (Zittrain and Edelman 2003), and dissidents using the internet have been arrested and made examples of (Kalathil and Boas 2003).

Calibrated coercion and good governance

Critiques of coercion often operate with binary categories, as if authoritarian rule were an on-off switch. Such a mindset sees little need to distinguish between, say, physical torture and economic coercion, since both are instruments of domination that violate individual freedom. One such leap was made by The Optical, a dissident Singaporean online newsletter, when it suggested that the Mugabe regime's behaviour in Zimbabwe was reminiscent of the PAP. Circulating a BBC report on Zimbabwe that made no mention of Singapore, the editors of The Optical topped off their posting with a headline that read "PAP tactics emulated elsewhere". The editors added in their preamble: "In fact, take away any reference to Zimbabwe in the report and you won't be faulted if you think it's about the control freaks in the PAP government and their stooges in the local media!" (Optical 2004).

Another international comparison, which received wide publicity, was the press freedom index of Reporters Without Borders, which ranked Singapore at number 147 out of 167 nations (Reporters Without Borders 2005). It was placed behind even Colombia (ranked 134), where according to the same organisation, "armed groups, as well as corrupt politicians and drug lords, continued their efforts to silence journalists" and where an average of five journalists are murdered each year. Singapore was also ranked behind Sudan (132), where six journalists were in prison in 2004, and where several journalists were arrested because Sudanese defamation law does not recognise truth as a defence. Singapore's low score was due to the lack of independent media (Asad 2005), which the researchers seem to have treated as commensurate with the physical brutality meted out to journalists in countries clustered around it in the table.

However, there are surely meaningful moral distinctions to be drawn among different types of coercion. To say that self-censorship that arises from regulatory restrictions and commercial constraints is equivalent to the physical torture of journalists is to trivialise the gross violations of human rights that occur in tyrannical regimes. Leaving aside moral arguments, the main reason for distinguishing between various degrees and types of coercion is that they have different political effects. As noted in our review of the literature on repression and dissent, how rulers use force affects the response they get from the ruled, which in turn affects the power they hold. This is why polemical comparisons of Singapore's press system to those of more violent regimes are woefully inadequate.

Like all authoritarian governments facing minimal legislative and judicial checks, Singapore's executive branch has seized sweeping powers to deal decisively with challengers. Catch-all laws give wide latitude to ministers, and the Constitution provides little protection to civil rights. These features of the Singapore system are nothing unusual. What is more unusual is that, even as it maintains and updates its arsenal of coercive powers, the Singapore government appears to have committed itself to the principle of strategic self-restraint, calibrating its coercion to get the job done with as little force as necessary.

The benefits of calibrated coercion have been apparent to various scholars ranging from critical theorists such as Foucault to researchers studying conflict resolution. First, calibrated coercion minimises the sense of moral outrage that could be used to mobilise the public against the state. Second, calibration reduces the salience of coercion, making consensus seem like the sole basis for stability and thus strengthening hegemony. Third, calibrated coercion preserves incentives for economic production and wealth creation, which rulers need as much as do the ruled.

Unfortunately, coercion is not an aspect of governance that leaders talk about, so it has not been possible to confirm just how conscious and deliberate Singapore's calibrated approach is. Lee Kuan Yew's two-volume memoirs, for example, say little about coercion. One rare and fleeting insight into Lee's thinking appeared in the wake of political instability in neighbouring Malaysia, where Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had neutralised his erstwhile deputy, the charismatic and popular Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's arrest and a beating in custody, from which he sensationally emerged with a bruised face, sparked protests the likes of which had not been seen for decades.

Interviewed by reporters, Singapore's senior minister (SM) did not join the international chorus of condemnation or question the Malaysian prime minister's motives, but instead put it down to an error in the choice of coercive instrument. According to *The Straits Times*:

> SM Lee said that Dr Mahathir had made several errors of judgment in handling his former protégé's case. Among these was arresting the politician under the Internal Security Act shortly after his dismissal from government in September 1998.
>
> When they met in Davos in January 1999, SM Lee asked Dr Mahathir: "Why did you arrest him under the ISA?
>
> "And he told me he did not know that Anwar was going to be arrested under the ISA. The Police chief had acted on his own authority.

"It never should have been that way, it should have been a straight-forward criminal charge."

The next disaster was the assault on the jailed politician by former top police officer Tan Sri Rahim Noor. The Malaysian leader said that he would not have obtained any benefit from an assault on Anwar.

"I agreed, but these are things that have been done and I am afraid he has paid very dearly for it. My sympathies are with him." (Pereira 2000)

The exchange shows Lee's appreciation of the need for restraint in the exercise of repression. From his report of his conversation with Mahathir, it appears that the Malaysian leader did not disagree with the principle, but certainly had difficulty implementing it. This raises the question of what it takes for state to calibrate its coercion.

First, and most obviously, you need rational leaders prepared to exercise political judgment in their actions. This is not so much a matter of conscience or empathy for the human rights of one's subjects. As the studies quoted above suggest, pure self-interest can engender self-restraint in the use of violence. This particular precondition for calibrated coercion is probably not in short supply around the world, compared with others (although one should not underestimate the roles played by irrational or insane leaders).

Second, leaders are more likely to calibrate their coercion the longer the time frames of their decisions. If they are only interested in the short term – like roving bandits, invading armies with no interest in holding the territory, or political leaders who expect to be ousted before long – there is less reason to curb their rapacious instincts. If, on the other hand, one takes the long-term view, the benefits of calibrated coercion, coupled with the building of ideological consensus, become much more relevant. This is related to the confidence one has in one's monopoly of power, as Mancur Olson points out in his example of the Mafia family. The PAP exemplifies the paradox that a dominant party, after solidly entrenching itself through illiberal means, can generate self-enforcing limits to its use of coercion.

Third, there must be tight civilian control over the instruments of coercion, namely the military and police. Without such control, there will always be cases of brutality and harassment that backfires on the state, such as the black eye that Anwar Ibrahim received from the Malaysian police while in custody. In Singapore, there are close ties between the uniformed services and the political elite. Prime minister Lee Hsien Loong and two members of his cabinet

were inducted from high-ranking positions in the military. However, the military as such has little political clout. Armed forces chiefs are changed every few years, offering them no chance to build an autonomous power base.

Fourth, calibrated coercion requires a holistic programme of control. The PAP's media controls work because they are part of a total approach, which consigns not the just the press, but also universities, trade unions, business groups, civil society organisations and opposition parties, to subordinate positions in politics. Without such a comprehensive approach, challenges would appear through the cracks of a kind that would invite a more repressive response. For example, unfettered opposition parties or radical student organisations could publish organs that are significantly more critical than the output of the controlled media organisations.

Fifth, calibrated coercion is a dynamic process of creatively adapting regulations to suit recent experience and changed circumstances. While most authoritarian governments would be content with the kinds of reserve powers that the PAP came into office with, the PAP treats these reserve powers as a costly last resort. Its media policies reveal its determination to devise new tools that nip challenges in the bud, quickly responding to new technologies and new sources from which opponents can mobilise resources.

Sixth, coercion carries the least political cost when it is applied through forces that the public assumes are outside of the ruler's control – in particular the invisible hand of the market, and the faceless workings of technology. The PAP has been able to avoid frequent and visible coercive intervention in the media, by structuring the newspaper market and the architecture of the internet in ways that predetermine the range of possible outcomes, which are then attributed to commercial or technological realities. The PAP has accomplished this by confidently embracing both market forces and new technology, recognising that – contrary to naïve libertarian arguments – that neither necessarily poses a threat to political control.

The PAP is certainly unusual in its capacity to practise calibrated coercion. It may even be unique. Singapore's small geographic size greatly helps the PAP achieve tight control over armed uniformed services and other institutions that are potential rivals – the third and fourth requirements identified above. Singapore's economic success also makes the PAP better placed than most authoritarian regimes to exercise calibrated coercion. The literature on violent dissent and repression tells us that both are tempered by rapid and equitable economic growth. Although growth has slowed in Singapore, it continues to enjoy low unemployment and a relatively high standard of living, reducing the social cleavages around which violent discord could develop.

The PAP thus appears to have benefited from a virtuous circle of increased stability and material comfort, reduced repression and dissent, and strengthened hegemony.

How long these circumstances can last is largely a matter of speculation. Determined challengers could try to expose the repressive core of the state by deliberately provoking a strong response. Following Arendt's logic, a violent reaction by the state would reduce its power. This appears to have been the tactic adopted by opposition leader Chee Soon Juan, who flouted public speaking rules and refused to pay a fine, landing him in prison. The degree of public outrage was limited, partly because the authorities did not respond to Chee's well-attended talks with any show of force, but simply dealt with the speaker and organisers later through the courts. Still, Chee's action drew attention to the taken-for-granted licensing rules for public events, and the ensuing public discussion led to accommodation by the government, which instituted a Speakers' Corner and then liberalised the licensing rules for indoor talks.

Calibrated coercion could also be compromised internally, by less astute political leaders. In this respect, the widely-held stereotype of Lee Kuan Yew as more "hardline" than younger leaders may be profoundly misleading. The central argument in this essay has been that calibrated coercion is more a matter of political nous than of ideological position. It is the product of long-term strategising, shaped through experience and honed through practice. Lee Kuan Yew and his two successors – who make up the three most senior members of the current government – have had a total of more than 90 man-years of cabinet experience. Future leaders will inherit formidable means of repression, but not necessarily the long-term vision or the expertise to use them in a calibrated manner. Like many other leaders around the world, they may reach quickly for the seemingly decisive weapons that are so easily within reach, at great cost to their legitimacy and power.

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