The Politics of Singapore

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Introduction

Singapore stands as a unique case in modern political history—a city-state that, since its independence in 1965, has charted a distinctive course marked by economic dynamism, political stability, and a form of governance that continues to draw both admiration and critique. Often cited as a model of efficiency and incorruptibility, Singapore's political system balances strong central authority with a deep emphasis on meritocratic leadership and pragmatic policymaking. Yet, beneath this surface lies a complex interplay of institutional design, party dominance, and evolving social expectations that shape what many call Singapore's "politics of exceptionalism."

At its core, Singapore operates as a parliamentary representative democratic republic, modelled on the Westminster system but shaped by a history of vulnerability, intense pragmatism, and the ever-present imperative for national survival. The Constitution of Singapore provides a robust framework for the state's three pillars: the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. The dynamics between these organs of state underpin much of what has enabled Singapore to achieve developmental success, but also pose distinctive challenges for the evolution of political life and participation.

Since the self-governing era began in 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) has maintained an iron grip on power, securing overwhelming legislative majorities and steering the nation's development. This historically uninterrupted control, unique among comparable multi-party democracies, is both a reflection of public trust—buoyed by impressive policy outcomes—and of structural advantages built into the political and electoral system. Mechanisms such as the Group Representation Constituencies, stringent restrictions on media and political activity, and the extensive use of laws regulating public discourse have fostered a political environment that many have described as "soft authoritarianism," where stability and prosperity often eclipse pluralism and open contestation.

Nevertheless, Singapore's political system is not static. The city-state faces profound changes as it confronts economic maturing, a diversifying society shaped by younger generations, and fast-changing global dynamics. Leadership succession—the transition to a new prime minister for the first time in nearly two decades—poses tests for both the ruling party and the broader political system. At the same time, longstanding issues such as cost of living, inequality, and the scope for political participation are increasingly at the forefront of national debates, pressed by more vocal and networked citizens.

This book offers a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Singapore. It aims to set out in clear, accessible terms the institutional framework, the

key actors, the rules of the political game, and the evolving landscape of challenges and opportunities. By delving into both the historical roots and contemporary realities, it seeks to provide not merely a descriptive account, but to illuminate the ongoing tensions between control and participation, prosperity and pluralism, that define Singaporean politics.

Whether you are a student, a policymaker, or an interested observer, this book invites you to look beyond headlines and stereotypes to understand the complexities of governance in Singapore. It is a story of continuity and change, dominance and diversity, stability and contestation—a story that will shape not only the island’s own future, but also inform broader debates about governance, democracy, and development in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER ONE: Singapore's Political History: From Colony to Independent State

Singapore's political story is not a straightforward march to independence, but rather a series of twists, turns, and calculated maneuvers, all set against the backdrop of shifting colonial powers, regional dynamics, and internal struggles for power. To understand the city-state's unique political system today, we must first delve into its historical roots, tracing its path from a British trading post to a sovereign nation.

The modern history of Singapore begins in 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles, an agent of the British East India Company, recognized the island's strategic location at the tip of the Malay Peninsula. He negotiated a treaty with the Sultan of Johor, securing permission to establish a trading port. This marked the beginning of British influence, and Singapore quickly grew into a vital center for trade and business, its natural harbor a key advantage.

For decades, Singapore was part of the British Straits Settlements, a collection of territories in Southeast Asia under British control. During this period, the island's administration was largely in the hands of the British, with limited opportunities for local political participation. This began to change in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, though brutal, ignited a sense of local identity and fueled calls for self-governance.

Following the war, Singapore reverted to British control, but the landscape had shifted. The British, facing a wave of decolonization across their empire, were more open to granting increased levels of self-governance. In 1946, Singapore became a separate Crown Colony, distinct from Malaya. This administrative separation was a significant step, although real power remained with the British Governor and colonial officials.

The first stirrings of electoral politics appeared in 1948 with limited elections for a portion of the Legislative Council, a body that advised the Governor. The electorate was small, initially restricted to British subjects. However, these early elections, while limited in scope, were a crucial step in introducing the idea of local representation and paved the way for future constitutional advancements. The Singapore Progressive Party (SPP), a conservative group, won the majority of the elected seats in the 1948 and 1951 Legislative Council elections.

A more substantial move towards self-governance came with the Rendel Constitution in 1955. This constitution introduced a new Legislative Assembly with a majority of elected members. For the first time, a significant number of representatives were

chosen directly by the people, and voting rights were extended to all local citizens. The 1955 election saw a more vigorous contest, with the Labour Front, led by the charismatic David Marshall, emerging as the leading party and Marshall becoming Singapore's first Chief Minister. Marshall, a fervent anti-colonialist, pushed for immediate independence.

However, Marshall's tenure was short-lived. His efforts to negotiate for full self-government in London in 1956 were unsuccessful, particularly regarding control over defense and internal security. Following the breakdown of these talks, Marshall resigned and was succeeded by Lim Yew Hock. Lim continued negotiations, and in 1958, a new constitution was agreed upon, granting Singapore full internal self-government. The British retained control over foreign affairs and external defense, with internal security handled by a newly established Internal Security Council. This was a significant step, though still short of complete independence.

The 1959 general election, held under this new constitution, was a pivotal moment. It was the first election for a fully elected Legislative Assembly with 51 seats, and compulsory voting was introduced. The People's Action Party (PAP), founded in 1954 with the goal of achieving independence, contested all seats and secured a landslide victory, winning 43 out of 51 seats with 53.4% of the popular vote. Lee Kuan Yew, the PAP's leader, became Singapore's first Prime Minister.

The PAP's victory ushered in a new era of self-governance. However, the political landscape was complex, marked by internal divisions within the PAP itself. A left-wing faction within the party, with strong ties to trade unions and Chinese-educated communities, presented a significant challenge to the moderate leadership led by Lee Kuan Yew. These ideological differences would eventually lead to a split.

With self-governance attained, the next major political question was Singapore's future relationship with neighboring Malaya. The idea of a merger between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya had been around for some time, seen by some as a way to achieve full independence and economic stability. Lee Kuan Yew was a strong proponent of merger, believing it essential for Singapore's survival.

In 1963, Singapore, along with Sabah and Sarawak, joined the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia. This union, however, was fraught with difficulties from the outset. Deep political, economic, and cultural differences between Singapore and the other states, particularly between the PAP and the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Malaya, quickly became apparent.

Political power struggles emerged, with Singapore's leaders feeling increasingly sidelined by the Malay-centric policies of the federal government. Economic disparities also fueled tensions, as Singapore's thriving economy and free-market approach clashed with the more centralized economic policies favored by Kuala Lumpur. The

PAP's push for a "Malaysian Malaysia," emphasizing equality for all races, was seen as a challenge to the special position of Malays advocated by UMNO.

These ideological and economic differences were exacerbated by growing racial tensions. The diverse ethnic makeup of both Singapore and Malaysia made each vulnerable to communal prejudices. Racial riots in Singapore in July and September 1964 highlighted the fragility of inter-ethnic relations and further strained the relationship between Singapore and the federal government.

The situation became increasingly untenable. The Malaysian government, under Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, grew concerned about Singapore's political trajectory and the PAP's growing influence. Faced with mounting tensions and the risk of further communal unrest, the decision was made to separate Singapore from the federation.

On August 9, 1965, Singapore was unexpectedly expelled from Malaysia. This was a dramatic and emotional moment, particularly for Lee Kuan Yew, who had strongly advocated for the merger. Singapore was now a small, independent island nation, facing an uncertain future in a volatile region. The sudden independence was not a victory celebrated with jubilant crowds, but a somber realization of the challenges that lay ahead.

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