

## THE EMERGENCE AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN SINGAPORE

KEIKO T. TAMURA

Singapore is an example showing that economic development, the affluence it creates, the emergence of a large middle class do not inevitably lead to liberal democracy. This study examines the present situation and problem of Singapore's middle class. It first describes the emergence and the characteristics of this class. It then examines the political control of the People's Action Party government, which has crushed democratic movements in the bud, and the government's discriminatory policies, such as in education and housing, which favor the growing middle class. Lastly, it discusses new problems that are arising from the middle class's mammonism and resultant political passivity. In conclusion, this study foresees that to keep the supply of material goods flowing to the middle class, the government will have to push for even greater economic development, which means that the role of the state in Singapore is likely to become even greater than before.

### INTRODUCTION

SINGAPORE'S rapid economic growth since the 1960s and the immense influence of the People's Action Party (PAP) over all political, economic, and social sectors of the nation is a well-known story. Following the recession of 1985, the government began introducing more private enterprise into the economy. While continuing with efforts to privatize and restructure government-linked companies, the government still remains the biggest stockholder in the economy, which has allowed it to regulate the entry of new economic players and to retain ultimate economic authority. Thus the actual character of the economy has not changed very much.

As a small city-state, devoid of natural resources and surrounded by an unstable international environment, the ruling party has viewed its long-standing control over the parliament as essential for Singapore's survival and development. There is no express provision in Singapore's constitution stating that sovereignty resides in the people. This could be regarded as reflecting the country's unstable international environment and the maintenance of the state as one of the most important constitutional principles; but it could also be the government's intention to show that leadership of the state lies with it and not with the people.

Indeed, there is no history in this affluent nation of the people undertaking any organized movement to demand greater power, free speech, or other democratic rights vis-à-vis the government. And despite the continuation of Singapore's repressive political system, the PAP in the 1997 general election succeeded in halting its long-declining support rate which had been falling since 1984, and in the 2001 general election it greatly increased its rate of support. Thus Singapore stands as an example showing that economic development and the affluence it creates does not inevitably lead to liberal democracy.

This illiberal political condition has formed the backdrop for the debate over Singapore's politically silent populace, particularly its middle class, and during the 1990s this debate grew increasingly animated. The middle class as designated here is made up of professionals and technicians and those engaged in administrative and managerial work. Clerical and office employees, whose work takes place in a different environment and is of a different nature, are not included.

The reason for the political reticence of Singapore's middle class, according to Lam (1999, p. 274), is that they are skeptical of democracy. He argues that "the majority of the middle class prefers the PAP to stay in power despite its authoritarian tendencies insofar as the party continues to satisfy their material needs." He sees the reason for this as lying in the strength of the state and in the immigrant disposition of the middle class which is only interested in its materialistic well-being. Thus it will be outside pressure that will prompt political change.

According to Rodan (1992, 1993, 1996), who has done the most work on analyzing Singapore's middle class, more than simply being skeptical of democracy, the middle class is seeking autonomy from the PAP, but they are seeking this autonomy as consumers rather than autonomy to challenge the distribution of social and political power in Singapore society. This is because the middle class has been promoted by the PAP government. They have built up a preeminent social position because of Singapore's ideology of institutionalized meritocracy. But Rodan argues that it is possible that the growing gap between rich and poor and the rigidity of Singapore's social structure could gradually make the middle class more dissatisfied, and it is possible that this could lead to a change in the PAP's control. A recently published paper by Oehlers (2001) also agrees with Rodan's argument.

The study will first examine the emergence and characteristics of Singapore's middle class, and discuss the government's political control and discriminatory policies that favor this growing class. This author also agrees with Rodan but expands the discussion to bring in new problems arising from the middle class's mammonism and resultant political passivity which have been due to the government's preferential policies. Finally it will look at other issues that will confront the government in the future.

## I. SINGAPORE'S MIDDLE CLASS

What portion of the population in this small city-state is the "politically reticent" middle class? What are the characteristics of this class? A look at the changes that have taken place in the makeup of employment and income will help answer these questions.

As can be seen from Table I, in 1970, 69.1 per cent of the population was employed in sales and service work and in manufacturing jobs; some thirty years later in 1999, this had shrunk to 42.2 per cent. Meanwhile, professionals and technicians and those employed in administrative and managerial work jumped from 10.3 per cent in 1970 to 40.3 per cent in 1999. The growth in administrative and managerial employment was especially great, expanding 3-fold between 1980 and 1989, and growing yet another 1.8-fold during the next ten years. The growth in professional and technical employment remained flat during the 1970s and 1980s, but it rose dramatically during the decade after 1989. As will be discussed later, this substantial alteration of the workforce was the culmination of the government's policy after 1979 to promote competitive, highly selective education which was directed at training a large number of skilled workers over a short period of time in order to realize the government's policy of upgrading Singapore's industrial structure.

The monthly earnings in 1999 for this new class of professionals, technicians, administrators, and managers are high. This is especially true for professionals and technicians, over half of whom earn more than S\$4,000 a month. To understand how high this income is, one need only compare it to the average monthly income for a Singapore worker of S\$1,700 (Ministry of Manpower, 1999 ed., p. ix).

A second characteristic of Singapore's middle class is the close relationship between income, education, and language. Table II shows the relationship between oc-

TABLE I  
OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION IN SINGAPORE, 1970, 1980, 1989, AND 1999  
(FOR WORKERS 15 YEARS OLD AND OLDER)

Occupation	1970	1980	1989	1999	(%)
					Monthly Income, 1999 (S\$4,000 or Higher)
Professionals and technicians	8.6	8.8	11.6	18.0	51.5
Administrators and managers	1.7	4.8	13.4	22.3	26.2
Clerical and office workers	12.9	15.6	13.9	14.0	0.1
Sales and service workers	29.9	22.7	14.6	13.1	0.8
Manufacturing workers	39.2	40.4	41.6	29.1	0.4
Agricultural workers	4.1	1.9	—	—	—
Other	3.6	5.8	4.9	3.5	3.3

Sources: Calculated by the author based on Ministry of Manpower (various years).

TABLE II  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OCCUPATION AND EDUCATION, 1999

(%)

Occupation	Primary Education or Lower	Completed Secondary Education		Diploma <sup>a</sup> and University Degree
		GCE "O"/"N" Levels or Lower	Attained GCE "A" Levels	
Professionals and technicians	0.6	26.2	14.1	59.1
Administrators and managers	10.0	37.0	10.6	42.4
Clerical and office workers	5.9	70.4	14.2	9.5
Sales and service workers	37.8	53.7	5.0	3.5
Manufacturing workers	42.4	52.4	3.4	2.0
Other	48.0	33.8	9.4	8.8

Source: Calculated by the author based on Ministry of Manpower (1999 ed., p. 96).

<sup>a</sup> Polytechnics or institutes of higher education.

TABLE III  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION, 2000

(%)

Language	Population (15 Years Old or Older)	Level of Education		
		Primary Education or Lower	Completed Secondary <sup>a</sup>	Diploma <sup>b</sup> and University Degree
English	20.9	3.9	50.9	45.2
Mandarin	32.0	24.8	51.6	23.5
Chinese dialects	29.8	54.6	31.8	13.6
Malay	13.0	37.5	56.3	6.1
Tamil	3.2	35.8	46.6	17.5

Source: Calculated by the author based on Department of Statistics (2001, pp. 106–7).

<sup>a</sup> Lower secondary, secondary, and upper secondary.

<sup>b</sup> Polytechnics or institutes of higher education.

cupation and education. For people engaged in professional or technical work, 73.2 per cent have completed secondary education (attained GCE "A" level) or graduated from university (including polytechnic) or attained higher degrees; for those in administrative or managerial work, it is 52.8 per cent. For professionals and technicians in particular, 59.1 per cent have diploma and university degree; and when compared with the other categories of work, these two have a high proportion of people who have completed higher education, indicating that the high-paying jobs in these two categories require a high level of education.

Table III shows the relationship between language (the one most frequently spoken at home) and education. The largest group is the 32 per cent of the population that speaks Mandarin most frequently at home; 23.5 per cent of the people in this

group have diploma and university degrees. People who speak English most frequently at home make up 20.9 per cent of the population; 45.2 per cent of them have acquired diploma and university degrees, which indicates the high level of education among these people. Within the Malay-speaking portion of the population (which is made up almost entirely of Malays), only a very small number of people have received diploma and university degrees.

Looking at the difference in education between generations, according to the 1999 statistics (Ministry of Manpower, 1999 ed., p. 4), 25.5 per cent of the people in the 25–29-year-old age group have university degrees, and 27.1 per cent have completed secondary education (GCE “A” level) or higher. By comparison, for the 55–59-year-old age group, the combined total of those having university or secondary education comes to less than 20 per cent. Thus for the parents’ generation, the level of education is low, and employment is overwhelmingly in the categories of manufacturing and sales/service. For the generation of their children, however, the level of education has risen dramatically, and there has been a rapid rise in the number of those engaged in professional and technical jobs and in administrative and managerial work. Thus in only one generation there has been a great change in the level of education and type of employment.

In sum, the middle class in Singapore has come into being in the very brief period of only one generation. It accounts for up to 40 per cent of the country’s work force, and it has a large core of highly educated people who have university and higher degrees and who are fluent speakers of English.

## II. GOVERNMENT SOCIAL POLICY AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

### A. *Upgrading Industry*

A major factor for the quick rise of an affluent middle class was the policy to upgrade Singapore’s industrial structure which was begun in 1979 and known as the “new industrial revolution.” Under this policy the government sought to upgrade industry by carrying out an across-the-board wage increase for workers and offering them incentives to study high technology, and by encouraging companies to raise productivity and transfer low-tech, labor-intensive operations to neighboring countries. During the recession of 1984–85 the policy came to a temporary halt, but continued thereafter with the fostering of industries in the fields of computers and computer peripherals, auto parts, and organic chemicals. During the 1990s the development of knowledge- and information-intensive industries was added to the policy, and the government also set out a policy to make Singapore one of the world’s important centers for financial and business services. Table IV shows the changes in Singapore’s industrial structure. Although in 1999 manufacturing still accounted for a large portion of GDP, that coming from financial and business ser-

TABLE IV  
 PRINCIPAL CHANGES IN SINGAPORE'S INDUSTRIAL STRUCTURE, 1980, 1989, AND 1999

Industry	% of GDP		
	1980	1989	1999
Manufacturing	29.1	28.0	25.0
Wholesale and retail <sup>a</sup>	21.6	14.0	15.0
Financial and business services	19.7	21.4	27.1
Transportation and communications	14.3	13.7	15.0

Source: Department of Statistics (various years).

<sup>a</sup> In the 1980 statistics, "wholesale and retail" is categorized as "commerce"; in the 1989 and 1999 statistics it is categorized as "whole sale and retail trade."

vices had significantly increased. Thus it can be seen that the composition of the country's industrial structure has been changing in the direction that the government intended.

In order to promote high value-added industries, Singapore had an urgent need to train skilled workers, and over the years the government greatly expanded the institutions of higher education. In 1980 the ratio of students entering universities and polytechnics was 6.6 per cent of the population (five years of age and older); by 1990 this had jumped to 15.6 per cent; and in 2000 it was 18 per cent. The expansion of this stratum of highly educated skilled workers was linked to the rapid growth and rising opportunities of Singapore's middle class.

As the policy to upgrade industry progressed, the government's social policies, particularly its educational and housing policies, increasingly favored the middle class, and over time these evolved into policies that sought to draw this class over to the side of the government. The following subsections will focus on these two particular policies, and will also examine why, socially, materialistically, and politically, this expanding middle class has not taken up issues or supported movements for democratic reform.

### B. *Educational Policy*

Singapore's educational policy falls into two periods—one before and the other after the government introduced its policy to upgrade industry. From the time of independence until the start of the upgrade policy, the government concentrated on raising the scholastic ability of all children and students through the expansion and diffusion of primary and secondary education. Following the introduction of the upgrade policy, education shifted to a policy that very much emphasized selectivity, one that would most effectively select out skilled workers for the country's upgraded industrial structure (Ikeda 1993).

Singapore's highly selective education is impartial at its start, meaning that the opportunity to receive an education is open to all children and students. But there-

after the course of a student's education is determined by test results. Some are compelled to leave school after receiving only a primary education; others finish up to the first part of secondary school, while others advance up to institutions of higher education. It would be no exaggeration to say that this highly selective system of education largely determines the future jobs and incomes of the country's children while they are still students between ten and fifteen years of age. Students with excellent grades are provided with large government scholarships and receive preferential treatment. All this has made education a paramount concern for the people. Top-level students who make up the educated elite are envied, admired, and held up for emulation. But at the same time the system has created a great fear of failing and despair of being left behind.

The expectations of and preferential treatment for the educated elite who stand at the top of the education system extend even to childbirth. In 1983 the government introduced a policy encouraging highly educated women to have more children while encouraging women with lower education to practice contraception. This policy indicated to the people that the idea of giving preferential treatment to top-level students, who were the backbone of the government's policy to upgrade industry, even reached down to the level of the genes. This policy was terminated in 1985, but a new family planning program was adopted in 1987, which has promoted three children as the ideal and has encouraged people with the economic means to have four or more children. People having three or more children receive tax refunds and are given priority in the allocation of spacious public housing (Wee, Tay, and Chan 1996, pp. 173–74). But as already stated, most of the top-educated elite move into professional, technical, administrative, or managerial jobs which pay high salaries. Under such a system, people "with the economic means" are mainly those who have been the most successful in the educational system. For this reason the government's family planning program and its tax refunds fall under the government's policy of giving preferential treatment to those who have been most successful in the educational system, and both can be regarded as measures for drawing these people over to the side of the government.

Another matter, however, is whether all Singaporeans have perceived the educational system as open impartially to all. For example, the Malays living in Singapore make up 14 per cent of the population, but their social status and limited economic strength in no way reflects that percentage. According to the 2000 statistics, only 0.7 per cent of the Malay population were college graduates which was very low compared with the 5.9 per cent for the Chinese population. Meanwhile the average monthly income for the Malay population was only 63.0 per cent of that for the Chinese (Department of Statistics 2000, pp. viii–iv). This gap had its origins in British colonial policy. The British gave priority to the Malays, as the natives of the land, when hiring personnel for the colonial government or as policemen, and at the time of Singapore's independence, one out of five Malay adult males, who made up

only 3.8 per cent of Singapore's population, was employed in such work. Most of the farmers and fishermen were also Malays (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 28, 1984). In a Singapore intent on developing into Southeast Asia's commercial and financial center, there was no preferential treatment for Malays as there was in Malaysia, and they were gradually marginalized politically and economically. Thus even at the time of independence, there was already a great difference between the Chinese and Malays, and the impartiality for all when starting in Singapore's educational system worked to exacerbate rather than reduce this difference, which has led to great inequality for the Malays.<sup>1</sup>

### C. *Housing Policy*

Eight-six per cent of Singapore's people live in public housing built by the government's Housing Development Board, and 81 per cent of these people own the flats they live in, which are popularly known as HDB flats. Singapore's housing policy has drawn worldwide attention, but like its policy on education, the intent of housing policy changed with the commencement of the government's drive to upgrade industry.

During the period before the industrial upgrade policy, the urgent task for housing policy was improving the poor housing conditions that existed at the time. Population density in 1959 was estimated at 50,200 people per square kilometer. There was an extremely insufficient amount of housing, and living conditions were very bad. This made construction of a large amount of low-cost, good-quality housing a major political issue. By dealing with this issue, the PAP would undercut the support base of the opposition parties; it would also enhance their success at the polls which would strengthen the stability of their political control (Tamura 2000, pp. 113–14). In 1968 the PAP introduced a policy to use money in the Central Provident Fund<sup>2</sup> as a source that people could draw on for the down payment to purchase HDB flats. This not only pushed up the rate of home ownership, it also made the people more diligent workers because they had home loans to pay off. The population's growing interest in purchasing their own homes raised the private ownership of HDB flats from 5.5 per cent in 1965 to 25.4 per cent in 1970, and up to 74 per cent in 1985.

But with the start of the industrial upgrade policy, the PAP began to follow a more discriminatory policy for HDB flats. It built spacious, up-scale flats which offered high-income people the satisfaction of living in higher-class housing. In 1989 owners of executive-type flats accounted for 3.1 per cent of all residents in HDB housing; by 1999 this had risen to 20.3 per cent (Department of Statistics, *Yearbook of*

<sup>1</sup> Rahim (1998) examines the problem of the Malays.

<sup>2</sup> The compulsory savings system managed by the state. Employers doing business in Singapore and their employees are required to make monthly deposits of a fixed percentage into the employees' bank accounts. These savings serve as a post-retirement pension fund.

*Statistics*, 2000 ed., p. 112). At the same time the government limited HDB flats to people with incomes of less than a certain level. This shows that people living in private up-scale condominiums and houses are among the wealth class whose incomes exceed a certain level. In 2000 the ratio of these people had reached 14.2 per cent (Department of Statistics 2000, p. 78). In this way the wealthy have been able to show off their status. In 1996 the government began a program of providing S\$40,000 subsidies to people who purchased private condominiums and houses, which has made it easier for Singaporeans to fulfill their aspirations to own up-scale housing.

#### D. *The Government's Political Control*

The social and material benefits that have flowed to the educated elite since the start of the government's industrial upgrade policy have made Singapore's affluent middle class all the more well-off, and the majority of these people are satisfied with their situation. As would be expected, the concern of these people now is directed toward maintaining and improving their status—looking for jobs that pay higher salaries or getting their children a high education and trying to get them into high-paying jobs like they themselves are doing. Their material concerns turn them away from wanting to reform their political situation, and this has been a major factor contributing to the PAP's stable rule.

Nevertheless, the drop in the PAP's support rate in the 1984 election showed that the party could not guarantee its stable rule based solely on the flow of social and material benefits to the educated elite. Also the rising number of emigrants each year, with a record 5,040 people leaving Singapore in the 1984 election year, could only have increased the government's uneasiness. The flow of emigrants climbed to 11,770 people in 1988. The number one reason given for emigrating was to get children into universities overseas after they had lost out in Singapore's highly competitive educational system. But there were also those who said they emigrated because they were seeking political freedom (*Sunday Times*, January 10, 1989). With so many people leaving this small country, among them being middle-class professionals and technicians who can easily find jobs overseas and who have taken their families with them, this surely has had a negative impact on Singapore's development.

Soon after the 1984 election, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced that the PAP intended to draw the middle class over to the side of the government, that more room would be made for its participation (Chua 2000, p. 70). The government then proceeded with plans to win over the middle class politically. At the same time it adroitly strengthened its political control, restricting the activity of opposition forces so they could not grow into movements for political change.

### 1. *Winning over the middle class*

The procedures whereby the PAP government itself elects opposition parliamentary members can be regarded as one measure aimed at winning over the middle class. One such procedure, the nomination of Non-Constituency Members of Parliament, is designed to ensure that a set number of parliamentary seats goes to members of parties other than the PAP. These members (no more than three people) are nominated to the parliament by the government from among the defeated opposition candidates who received a high number of popular votes in the elections. It seems this measure is to show the people that policies are not decided solely by the PAP, that the opinions of opposition parties are also included. But it also seems that the government wants the people to think that there is no need to vote for the opposition parties because these parties are given a set number of parliamentary seats. However, these Non-Constituency Members of Parliament are not empowered to vote on constitutional amendments or budget bills.

Another procedure aimed at the middle class is known as the Nominated Member of Parliament and was introduced in 1990. This system allows the parliament to directly nominate members (not to exceed six people) from the public in order to secure the views of prominent figures from a broad spectrum of society. However, these Nominated Members of Parliament, like their non-constituency brethren, have no rights to vote on constitutional amendments or budget bills; moreover, their terms are limited to two years (although they can be renominated). To date those who have taken seats as Nominated Members of Parliament have been doctors, company directors, university professors, and other similar professional or managerial people belonging to the wealthy middle class, another clear indication that the intent of this system is to draw this class over to the side of the government. The placating aspect of this system along with the comment by Lee Hsien Loong, the Minister of Trade and Industry, that people could stop supporting opposition candidates with their votes (*Straits Times Weekly Edition*, December 9, 1989) show that the PAP probably would like to exclude opposition parties from the parliament.

### 2. *Restricting the forces of political criticism*

In 1983 the PAP accused the Worker's Party of having falsified past reports of its financial accounts, and took the party's general secretary, J. B. Jeyaretnam, to court. The judge found him not guilty on four of the five charges brought against him. Soon thereafter the judge was reassigned. When Jeyaretnam criticized the judge's treatment, the PAP government amended the law pertaining to the rights of parliamentary members, declared that by his criticism, Jeyaretnam had abused his rights as a parliamentarian, and a huge fine was levied against him. Finally he was deprived of his parliamentary credentials for five years and disqualified from running in elections until the general election of 1997. After the Worker's Party, another opposition group, the Singapore Democratic Party, won seats in the parliament. A re-

port that it presented to the parliament in December 1996 concerning legislation on health insurance was found to contain false information. The amended law on parliamentary rights was again applied, and four members of the Democratic Party were ordered to pay a fine of S\$5,100 (*Strait Times Weekly Edition*, December 14, 1996).

The PAP's unrelenting methods of never overlooking the opposition's past mistakes, of taking them to court and having them penalized with huge fines have made it close to impossible for a person wanting to be a politician to stand as a candidate for a party other than the PAP; and should he (or she) manage to run as an opposition candidate, it tells the populace that he (or she) has to be a person of impeccable behavior who has not committed even the smallest infractions.

The government also has kept a watchful eye on the mass media. In 1984 the Singapore Press Holding Company was set up which henceforth published all of the nation's seven major daily newspapers, and high-level bureaucrats came in to help manage the new company. Foreign magazines and newspapers were not exempt from controls. In 1986 a revision of the press law allowed the government to prohibit the entry or publication, or limit the sales and circulation of foreign publications that "interfered in Singapore's domestic affairs."

During June and July of 1987, the Internal Security Act was invoked, and twenty-two people who were important in a group connected with the Catholic Church and active in promoting human rights and redress for unskilled foreign workers were arrested and accused of "being involved in a Marxist plot to overthrow the state." Perhaps the extent and thoroughness of the government's suppression of this religion group was intended as a warning to the middle class with its high level of schooling in English language education. The government feared that religion could form a link between the educated elite, the people expected to shoulder the work of developing the nation, and Singapore's unskilled labor force, uniting the two into a powerful force critical of the existing system.

Novelists and other writers, who might be expected to be free to express themselves, have been treated no differently. In November 1994 the distinguished essayist and short-story writer Catherine Lim wrote an article critical of the government that was carried in an English language newspaper (*Sunday Times*, November 20, 1994). The prime minister reacted quickly, heaping harsh criticism on Lim; he said, "She has slandered my actions as prime minister. . . . In Asia a prime minister's dignity is important and must not be slandered by people like writers who are on the fringes of society" (*Straits Times Weekly Edition*, December 10, 1994). He later remarked that if she wanted to criticize, she could do so after becoming a politician (*Straits Times Weekly Edition*, December 24, 1994). Lim immediately placed letters of apology in a number of newspapers which got her out of her difficulty. However, had she not apologized quickly, it is likely that she would have been sued for damaging the prime minister's honor and compelled to pay a large compensation.

Most of Singapore's population is afraid of the government and stays away from or feels alienated by politics. In March 1998 the National University of Singapore Political Science Society held a forum under the title "Is There a Future for Civil Society in Singapore?" More than three hundred students and university staff came to hear the panel of four speakers whose conclusion was, as long as there is a climate of "fear" in the people, there is little room for the growth of civil society in Singapore. Then a remark, quite in line with the panelists' conclusion and which caught everyone's attention, came from the audience. No one can speak at the forum when policemen on campus were checking on participants attending the forum (Da Cunha 1999, p. 275).

### 3. *Singapore's mammonism*

While the PAP government's repressive policies have been pushing the people since the 1980s ever further from politics, the visible material well-being created by the link of high education with high-income jobs and high-income jobs with owning up-scale homes has become the main concern of the educated elite.

In Singapore today, the dream of most young people (the Singapore dream) is to obtain the 4Cs: a credit card, club membership, condominium, and a car; all material things. This Singapore dream was also evident in a survey done by the Singapore 21 Committee.<sup>3</sup> To the question, "By what measure does society define success?" the overall most common response was "having a happy family." When broken down by age groups, the top response for those in the 30–39-year-old bracket, totaling 47.4 per cent, was "to be rich." When asked about the criteria for choosing a job, the greatest number, 60 per cent, said they would choose a job with high pay even if it was one they did not like. Only 16.7 per cent answered that job interest rather than remuneration was more important (Tan 1999, pp. 177–79). Becoming rich and obtaining the 4Cs means working in some sort of professional or managerial job that provides a high salary, and this means getting drawn onto the side of the all-powerful PAP government.

However, the paramountcy of materialism poses a dilemma for both the middle class and the government. In return for its hard work, the middle class continues to demand from the government material goods that symbolize ever higher social status, and the government has to continue responding to this demand. If it cannot respond, it will lose the support of the middle class. Thus maintaining economic development has become everyone's objective, and in pursuing this objective, the government's power is sure to grow all the more.

With the middle class largely making no effort to participate in politics, the PAP

<sup>3</sup> The Singapore 21 Committee was organized in August 1997 and composed of ten PAP parliamentarians. It brought together eighty-three people from a broad spectrum of society, including business, social welfare people, local activists, and professionals. The committee was charged with drawing up guidelines for Singapore society as it approached the twenty-first century.

government is worrying about recruiting the elite who will carry along the next generation. It is not rare for former cabinet ministers, who have expressly retired from politics and returned to the world of business, to be called back into the government because of an “insufficiency of human resources,” or for one minister to hold a number of cabinet posts concurrently. But this is the inevitable result of the people’s alienation from politics.

### III. THE GOVERNMENT’S IDEAL MIDDLE CLASS

#### A. *The Growing Gap between Rich and Poor*

Along with its policy to win over the middle class and its unrelenting political control, the PAP government rolled out a vigorous campaign during the 1990s advocating the 5Cs: character, courage, commitment, compassion, and creativity, as the “New Singapore Dream.”<sup>4</sup>

The campaign had two aims. One was a new government expectation that the middle class should play a role in helping the nation compensate for the lack of a social security and welfare system, and help rectify the widening gap between rich and poor; in order to play this roll, the other aim was to instill in the middle class a more compassionate bond with the nation (i.e., a more patriotic spirit).

Singapore’s outlays for social security and welfare are very low. They were only 3.06 per cent of total government expenditures in 1994 (IMF 1996). Having observed the problems of the welfare states in the West, the PAP government after independence followed a course of not readily aiding the economically weak. This led it to cut back on its funding of social security and push instead for economic development. But the financial benefits going to the educated elite meant that this affluent stratum became all the more well-off, thus expanding the gap between rich and poor. Following Asia’s economic crisis, this expansion became more acute. The average monthly household income of the bottom 10 per cent of the population in 1998 was S\$258; in 2000 this had fallen by half to S\$133. Meanwhile the income of the top 20 per cent rose from fifteen times to eighteen times greater than the bottom 20 per cent (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 12, 2000). This worsening situation brought growing calls for the government to do more to assist the economically weak and the unemployed. According to a survey taken in September 1998 by a sociologist at the National University of Singapore, 72 per cent of respondents said that the government should provide financial assistance to those unsuccessful in society and to the unemployed (*Strait Times Weekly Edition*, October 3, 1998).

However, the government made no effort to change its stance. It continued to stress the responsibility of the people, especially of the well-off, to the nation, and

<sup>4</sup> “Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference,” <http://www.gov.sg/singapore21/keyideas2.htm/> (December 2000).

expected them to willingly extend a hand to help the economically weak. In his speech on the anniversary of Singapore's independence in 1996, the prime minister declared that he wanted the people to strengthen their commitment and to be aware of their responsibilities to the nation, not only for its further development, but to make it a home for the people (*Strait Times Weekly Edition*, August 10, 1996). Soon thereafter the government started its "Many Helping Hands" campaign aimed at encouraging popular assistance for the less economically fortunate.

B. *The Ideal Middle Class as Seen in the 1997 and 2001 General Elections*

The government's attempts to make the affluent middle class more aware of its responsibilities to the nation and to urge its involvement in politics was evident in the candidates that the PAP fielded in the 1997 and 2001 general elections. There was no great change in the party's stance in these two elections. All of the new candidates in the 1997 election, and all but one in the 2001 election had university degrees, and more than half of these had graduate school or higher education (Table V). The occupations of almost all of these people when they became candidates were as doctors, company directors, and other such professional, technical, administrative, and managerial occupations pursued by the affluent middle class. But more interesting than their magnificent education and job record was the family background of many of these candidates. Over half of them in the 1997 election and one-third in the 2001 election essentially grew up in poor families (Table V). The news articles that introduced them wrote prodigiously and in great detail about the sort of work their parents did and the kind of house they had lived in as a child. And all of these candidates alike emphasized that they wanted to express their thanks to the PAP government, and that they were motivated to become candidates as repayment for the many benefits they had received in their lives.

With the widening gap between rich and poor, it seems that one aim of the government in encouraging the financially well-off to help the economically weak is so that the wealthy stratum of society can be displayed as contributing positively to the

TABLE V  
BACKGROUND OF NEW PAP CANDIDATES  
(IN THE 1997 AND 2001 GENERAL ELECTIONS)

Election	New Candidates	Essentially Poor Candidates	Received English Language Education	(No.)
				Graduate School or Higher Education
1997	24	13	18	16
2001	27	9	26	13

Sources: For 1997, *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, October 5, 1997; October 12, 1997. For 2001, <http://www.pap.org.sg/GE2001/candidates>.

nation which demonstrates to the many people who are not of the educated elite that it is possible to achieve high social status. At the same time it seems that the government would like to evoke in those who have successfully achieved high status a greater feeling of gratitude and patriotism toward the nation. Moreover, with Singapore expected to enter a time of difficult economic development, the government wants the wealthy of the country to be the ideal middle class devoted to the national policy and a model for the people.

However, in the 2001 general election, there were four fewer candidates from poor families running the PAP ticket than had run in the previous election, an indication that as Singapore's social structure grows more rigid, it is going to become more difficult for the PAP to find educated elite from among the families of the poor. If Singapore fails to construct a system for aiding its economically weak, then the gap between the rich and poor will increase; and with the economy entering a time of diminished development, dissatisfaction among the middle class is likely to increase.

## CONCLUSION

Singapore's middle class came into being within the short period of one generation and now accounts for 40 per cent of the total working population. The main factor for this rapid rise has been the training of a large number of skilled workers under the government's policy of restructuring industry. Well educated after rising through the country's rigorous, highly selective education system, holding university degrees, and fluent in English, this middle class has been the greatest beneficiary of Singapore's economic development which has been totally under the guiding hand of the PAP government. The high incomes of the educated elite, which have made this stratum of society ever more affluent, have been due very much to the government's decidedly discriminatory policies favoring these people. They have acquired the 4Cs, are satisfied with their present conditions, and are not demanding change in the PAP's long-standing repressive rule. But even if there were people who demanded change, with free speech circumscribed and freedom of action limited, with opposition parties, the mass media, and other forces that could be critical of the PAP government tightly controlled, and with people or movements that could become centers of protest always nipped in the bud, it would be extremely difficult for them to organize. Given the political attitude and the present material well-being of Singapore's middle class, it is hard to imagine a large movement for change emerging from their ranks.

Perhaps more pressing for both the middle class and the government is the dilemma posed by the paramountcy of materialism that has become the preoccupation of the middle class. As repayment for their hard work, the middle class continues demanding from the government more material goods that symbolize ever higher so-

cial status. To meet this demand the government has to keep the economy developing. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly more difficult for the PAP to recruit from the middle class the next generation of political leaders. The participation in recent general elections of educated elite who are committed to politics and seeking to contribute to the nation (i.e., the ideal middle class that the government wants to put on display) seems to indicate the correctness of the present government's policies that have enabled these people to attain high status, and the PAP seems to have regained the support of the people.

But even if the government can display a middle class committed to politics and serving the nation, and even if it can demonstrate to the people that it is possible to attain high social status, as long as there is no change in Singapore's repressive political conditions, there is little likelihood of a large part of the middle class becoming politically involved. Also, with Singapore's social structure growing more rigid, it is going to become increasingly less possible for people who have grown up in relatively poor families to join the ranks of the educated elite. This will decrease the mobility of the middle class and increase the rigidity of Singapore's social structure. Dissatisfaction will increase among those who can no longer improve their social status, and this will undermine the stability of PAP rule.

Singapore has created an affluent society, but the supply of goods and material well-being afforded by this affluence is being used adroitly by the PAP leadership to parry the people's rising political consciousness and criticism of the government, and to continue the PAP's repressive political control. To keep the supply of material goods flowing to all strata of society, the government will have to push for even greater economic development, which means that the role of the state in Singapore is likely to become even greater than before.

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