

REPUBLIC'S SUCCESS HAS GIVEN IT 'POLICY LABORATORY' STATUS

Resisting authoritarian populism: Lessons from and for Singapore

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The Donald Trump presidency and Brexit have dominated public discourse this year. Both have been characterised as manifestations of what appears to be a rising tide of right-wing populist politics in many parts of the world.

Six years ago, in 2011, Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) won the country's general election, but earned its lowest percentage of the popular vote since coming into power more than half a century ago.

Although many viewed these more competitive elections and improved prospects for political opposition as a sign of political liberalisation and maturity, a few were quietly concerned. They fear that Singapore's paternalistic and technically rational administrative state, credited with the Repub-

lic's remarkable success and largely insulated from political pressures, would start to succumb to populism, and that the Singapore success story would start to unravel.

This, in fact, has not happened.

In the years leading up to the subsequent general election in 2015, the PAP government carefully studied the situation and adjusted its policies to reassure the voters— including those who were feeling left out of Singapore's economic success story — that their concerns and needs were being taken into account, even as the global city became more expensive and crowded to live in.

In 2015, Singapore grandly celebrated 50 years of independence, and memorialised founding father Lee Kuan Yew's heroic leadership after his death. The PAP was rewarded with a very comfortable majority, securing once again the dominance that is the only system many Singaporeans have ever known.

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Although a young, small and multi-ethnic nation-state, Singapore is prosperous, peaceful and surprisingly influential in the global imagination. But its international image has attracted contradictory reactions.

On the one hand, the liberal West criticises Singapore for not adequately defending human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The West acknowledges that Singapore's elections are free, but argues that they are not sufficiently competitive, as they always produce and legitimise the same authoritarian outcome.

But authoritarian Singapore's economic success has been impressive, celebrated in the myth of the "Four Asian Tigers" and in the city-state's own national narrative of developing rapidly from Third World to First.

Singapore's success has been explained, and its authoritarian methods justified, by constructing an ideology first of Confucian values and later of Asian values.

These have been held up as a shield against an occidentalised image of Western insensitivity, ignorance, hypocrisy and arrogance. Singapore's material success, and ideological expressions of this success, have had the effect of weakening the legitimacy and force of liberal criticisms.

On the other hand, there has also been widespread admiration for the Singapore model of development and governance. Developing countries have looked to Singapore not only for a model of rapid growth and development, but also for viable alternatives to liberal democratic trajectories.

Advanced countries of the West have looked favourably upon the seriousness with which Singapore takes governance and policymaking.

They admire the pragmatism of a technocratic government that has managed to escape the paralysis of ideological and political deadlock, and to enjoy the luxury of focusing on performance and results, upon which its legitimacy and popular support are staked.

Singapore is also viewed as a policy laboratory, especially relevant at the scale of cities, where ideas can be tested and, if successful, adapted elsewhere.

GUARDING AGAINST THREAT OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

History presents numerous examples of fragility where liberal democracies are concerned. Political philosophy tells us that diversity — and nearly every society today is diverse — can

weaken the communitarian basis of a society, making it difficult for the state to function well and eroding the trust that binds people to one another and to their institutions.

Without a strong institutional basis, the nation-state can become vulnerable to authoritarian populism, particularly when hit by crisis. Out of a demoralised society, moral and political entrepreneurs, often skilful demagogues, emerge and compete for power by mobilising a collective sense of victimhood directed against an allegedly corrupt establishment as well as scapegoats such as immigrants, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities, upon whom the entire blame for all of society's ills are placed.

To prevent this, liberal democracies need to focus not only on aggregating the votes and voices of their citizens; just as much, they need to strengthen state institutions and build resources, capacity and shared narratives to protect an inclusive and vibrant public space in which diversity helps to shape public moralities, rather than allow a singular public morality to restrict and even eliminate diversity.

Liberal democracies need to do a better job of producing and implementing coherent and effective policies that are not harmfully constrained by the limits of electoral cycles. How can all of this be achieved?

Singapore's strong state may provide some answers. Its rigorously meritocratic institutions attract the most talented Singaporeans into public service, forming an unashamedly elite government that is able to implement policies, even unpopular ones, that it deems to be in the long-term public interest.

High-quality education, which has been consistently lauded in international benchmarking tests, is available to all and has helped to build a broadly reasonable citizenry.

To attract the best people to the public service and keep it clean, Singapore pays some of the highest public-service salaries in the world. The incentive structure and harsh punishment have made corruption not only a risky but also an irrational choice. Integrity is more than just an organisational slogan — it is deeply suffused in the culture.

Singapore's clean and meritocratic government is also a pragmatic one. Policymaking is mostly grounded in evidence, research, analysis and the projection of future scenarios.

Refusing to be shackled by ideo-

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logical, moralistic and sentimental rigidities when it matters, the Government's focus has been on performance and results.

Formal international validation of Singapore's success, together with the day-to-day experience of ordinary Singaporeans, who have seen their country transform into a global city of the first rank, have given the state good reasons to earn performance legitimacy.

Despite their specific grievances and mild resentment of what they perceive as an often-arrogant establishment, the people of Singapore on the whole trust their government highly, as surveys regularly indicate.

For liberal democracies to thrive and not collapse under the weight of their unavoidable diversity, they could benefit from instituting a strong, meritocratic, clean and pragmatic state to ensure peace, stability, effective policies, a well-educated citizenry and generalised trust.

These can help to regenerate civic

life and fortify it against the threat of authoritarian populism.

EMBRACING CHANGE

Although Singapore may offer some lessons to strengthen liberal democracies, Singapore itself can afford to learn many lessons from healthy liberal democracies to prevent its own institutions from degenerating and to keep them dynamic.

Without a healthy dose of political competition, for instance, there is nothing stopping Singapore's meritocracy from degenerating into vulgar elitism, producing a self-serving establishment consisting of individuals who are self-congratulatory, unrepresentative, unresponsive, complacent, and lacking in imagination and courage.

Such an elite will devote much of their energies to keeping themselves in power or defining merit exclusively in their own image. Armed with expertise, leaders can appear like cold technocrats, arrogant and incapable of understanding the challenges of ordi-

nary life or of making policy decisions in an inclusive and empathetic manner.

Without social and political mobility, the elite can lose the motivation to excel, and the masses can become disillusioned with and disengaged from the system. As ordinary Singaporeans continue to witness a rise in relative poverty, socio-economic inequalities, cost of living and immigration, the global city may also become vulnerable to authoritarian populism.

Increasingly aware of these dangers, Singapore's government has attempted to rebalance and re-qualify its rhetoric and practice of meritocracy. It now speaks regularly about compassionate and inclusive forms of meritocracy, focusing on skills and not academic qualifications alone, and implementing new programmes that purport to advance continuous, lifelong learning.

Clearly, for the rhetoric to be more believable and the programmes effective, more needs to be done, particularly in the coming years as disruptions to the economy and the nature of work will create a bigger pool of

disenfranchised Singaporeans. Similarly, Singapore's government speaks more articulately of sustainability, resilience and foresight as essential aspects of its practice of pragmatism.

It has the potential to dislodge the system from its now crude and sometimes even dogmatic adherence to neoliberal economic growth, made respectable by the fig leaf that is Singapore's rhetoric of pragmatism. But success makes it difficult to shed the formulas that have led to it, even when it seems to make sense to do so.

Liberal democracies need a strong government — clean, meritocratic and pragmatic — in order to survive the constant threat of authoritarian populism.

At the same time, Singapore's strong state can be made more resilient by heightening competition in the political system, including embracing change instead of avoiding alternative positions and points of view, and developing a capacity for more empathetic modes of engaging and including a diverse public.