

Splits in the Singapore elite



The dramatic electoral setbacks suffered by the People's Action Party government in Singapore during 2011 have led to speculation about the possibility of a future opposition victory. A major line of thinking within the opposition camp is that such a change would most likely come about following a serious split in Cabinet, whereby a strengthened parliamentary opposition could align itself with a dissident faction in Cabinet. Should such a development come about it would be emulating the 'Taiwan model', whereby democracy and a change of government were brought about when the Guomintang's President Lee effectively endorsed the opposition Democratic Progressive Party and brought about a two-way split in his own party and a three-way split in his party's popular vote.

I contend that this is a most unlikely development in Singapore for three distinct reasons.

The first and main reason for this logic is that the Singapore elite is much more risk averse than the Taiwan elite ever was. Singapore is so much smaller than Taiwan; its economy is so much more fragile and vulnerable to the mood swings of international finance and markets, that such a split is unlikely unless the country itself is nearly on its last legs. Dissidents in Cabinet would be, in their minds, putting at risk the fundamentals that give the international financial and investment markets confidence in Singapore, and I do not believe that they would take such a risk.

The second reason I doubt the likelihood of such a scenario is a little counter-intuitive: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has used the PAP's electoral setbacks in 2011 to consolidate his stature within in the elite. By effectively shifting the blame for the parliamentary losses onto others – most notably his own father – and by ensuring that he has been given credit for the result not being any worse than it was, he has now, for the first time, stepped out of his father's shadow and clearly established himself as the master of the situation. His party lost a significant amount of electoral ground in 2011, but Lee successfully stage-managed the narrative of the election after the event, beginning on election night itself, during which the Elections Department actively cooperated to allow him to mount the podium and claim victory as the government's white knight and saviour. He is now fully in charge of Cabinet and has used his new power ruthlessly to push aside the deadwood and the duds who had been pulling the party down.

Before the 2011 results there had been some dissident rumblings in Cabinet, but even then this did not amount to very much. Former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan told in interview in January 2011 that he had become used to government MPs and even one or two Cabinet members congratulating him for his forthright and highly critical speeches in Parliament – but they would not speak out themselves, nor even associate themselves with dissenting voices. This is decidedly not the stuff of which Cabinet splits are made!

The third reason I doubt the likelihood of a split in the elite is that the best chance for such a split came and went in the mid-1990s when Goh Chok Tong was prime minister. Goh tried to use his position as PM and his control of the Ministry of Finance through his close ally, Finance Minister Richard Hu, to wrest the reins of power from the Lee family – father and son. He was doing this through a deliberate campaign of supplanting the Lee family's patronage in the civil service and in the huge and powerful government-linked company (GLC) sector. The campaign promised to be particularly effective in the GLC sector.

The key instrument of patronage in this campaign was the secretive Directorship and Consultancy Appointments Council (DCAC) which at the time was responsible for the appointment of boards and executive positions across the whole of the GLC sector, and which operated under the authority of the Finance Minister Hu.

Goh had been working this plan systematically for several years when in 1996 he was given the chance to seriously challenge the Lee family's hegemony after Lee Kuan Yew and Lee Hsien Loong were reported to Richard Hu for accepting illegal multi-million dollar 'discounts' from a publicly listed property developer, on whose board sat one of Lee Kuan Yew's brothers. This was Goh's one decisive chance to snatch power, but he backed away completely: he did not even refer the matter to the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB).

Having passed up his one chance for power Goh gave up even trying to rule. Soon after this episode, much of the DCAC's power was stripped from it and passed to holding companies (Temasek Holdings and Singapore Technologies) that were then placed in the hands of Lee family

loyalists like S. Dhanabalan, and Lee family members like Ho Ching and Kwa Chong Seng. In response, Prime Minister Goh stopped engaging seriously in domestic politics and left it to then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, turning his attention instead to developing Singapore's trade contacts in the Middle East.

1996 effectively marked the end of the Goh putsch against the Lee family and the consolidation of the Lee family's power.

My point is that if there had been going to be a split in the elite then the 1990s was when it was going to happen. Not only was there no political storm in 1996, but there was barely even a whisper of a breeze to ruffle the appearance of elite solidarity. If it did not happen then, there is much less chance of it happening now or in the near future when there is not even a challenger.

My reading now is that Lee Hsien Loong is there for as long as he wants. This does not mean that he will not face political problems and challenges – especially now that the opposition is newly invigorated and the elite has lost a lot of its control of the agenda and the flow of information – but he should at least be able to face them as the undisputed head of a united leadership group, without having to look over his shoulder for fear of being undermined either by a challenger or by his overbearing father.

Dr Michael Barr is a senior lecturer in international relations, [Flinders University](#). Dr Barr presented his research at this Year's Malaysia and Singapore Update at the Australian National University. Video footage of the event is available [here](#).