

No. 46

ELITES AND NATION DEVELOPMENT  
IN SINGAPORE

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August 1975

## ELITES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SINGAPORE

### I. Introduction: Who Are the Elites

The topic on the structure and the role of elites in national development in Singapore is of great interest to social scientists as well as to the general public. This issue, however, is extremely complex, for it involves multi-dimensional factors and qualitative analysis. Moreover, there is lack of documental data and practically no one has done any systematic study on this topic in Singapore.<sup>1/</sup> This paper attempts to make some observations on the role of elites in national development in Singapore and to trace the changes in the structure of the elites, especially the power elite, in the course of development over the past twenty years.

The elite concept did not become widely used in social and political writing until the late nineteenth century, when it was diffused through the sociological theories of elites, notably in the writing of Velfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca.<sup>2/</sup> The use of the term "elite" by Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Lasswell and Mills suggests various definitions, but there is a fairly clear consensus for its applicability. The most general usage refers to those positions in society which are at the summits of key social structures, e.g. the higher positions in the government, military, politics, religion, economy, education, mass organizations and the professions. In defining these high position holders as the elite, there are, however, two distinct approaches. One focuses exclusively on the power held by the elite as illustrated by the concept of 'power elite'.<sup>3/</sup> The other stresses the functional importance of

<sup>1/</sup> Chan Heng Chee has dealt with some aspects of this topic in "Politics in An Administrative State," Occasional Paper Series No. 11, Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, January 1975.

<sup>2/</sup> T.B. Bottomore, Elites and Society (London: C.A. Watts & Co. Ltd, 1964), pp. 1-14.

<sup>3/</sup> See C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

elites to society at large as elaborated by the concepts of 'strategic elites' and 'functional elites'.<sup>4/</sup>

Using Parson's functional theory, the elite becomes the minority, which is necessary for the functioning of the society. Elite is considered a conglomeration of many small groups, functioning as leaders in different areas of the society, for example the cultural elite, the intellectuals, the political elite, the bureaucrats, the business elite. These elites consist of persons who have achieved key functional roles in the society. They qualify for inclusion in elite groups on the basis of their achievements, since it is their functional contributions to the society which are the crucial consideration. The elite structure is a heterogeneous one and this gives rise to the situation in which the power in a modern society is usually shared by different elitistic groups who constrain and support each other and who are selected in a democratic manner.

C. Wright Mills,<sup>5/</sup> however, forcefully argues that America is not governed by a heterogeneous elite, but by a homogeneous power elite, which is made up of three dominant groups: leaders of big corporations, the military establishment and the top civil servants.

Mills' thesis of the uniformity and coherence of a nation's power elite is supported by the power system in Thailand. Here, the power elite is made up of the three most significant groups of elite, which are the military, the civil bureaucrats and the business elite.<sup>6/</sup> These are the people who control the wealth of the country, who have social status and who wield political power. Among these three groups of elite

4/ For example, see Suzanne Kellner, Beyond the Ruling Class (N.Y.: Random House Inc., 1963) and Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power" in R. Bendix and S.M. Lipsett, eds. Class, Status and Power (N.Y.: Free Press, 1966) pp. 240-265.

5/ C. Wright Mills, op. cit.

6/ Likhit Dhiravegin, "The Power Elite in Thailand: A General Survey with a Focus on the Civil Bureaucrats", unpublished manuscript, 1975.

an alliance has developed. The business elite have sought political protection from the military and the bureaucrats while the latter two groups obtain economic benefit from the former. This power system has seriously been challenged by the newly emerging groups of people since the October uprising in 1973. These newly emerging groups are the people's representatives, the student leaders, the labour leaders and the peasant organizers. As pointed out by Likhit Dhiravegin, however, they are, still at an early stage of becoming organized. Structurally they have not yet become fully institutionalized. They could at best be considered interest groups who can play significant roles in influencing the decision-making process.

The Philippines cases demonstrates another type of power system in developing countries. According to a study done by Agpalo,<sup>7/</sup> the proclamation of martial law in 1972 has changed the power structure in the Philippines from a fragmental elite to a homogeneous and cohesive elite. Under the martial law regime, the power system is governed by a small power elite of 28 persons, who are the President, 21 cabinet members and six officials with cabinet rank. This power elite is cohesive and homogeneous with regard to their political ideologies, interests and objectives.

In general, the elite is usually distinguished from the masses on the basis of three attributes: wealth, status and power. These are usually small groups of people in a society who control most of the wealth, whose social statuses are on the top stratum and who are directly or indirectly involved in the decision-making process which affects members of the society. This is particularly true in traditional societies. When the society undergoes the process of modernization and industrialization, the attributes of the elite can change. One significant change is the decline of the importance of

7/ R.E. Agpalo, "The Political Elite in A Post-Traditional Society: The Case of the Philippines", unpublished manuscript, 1975.

wealth in determining the elite status in modern societies.

Two important elements of elite status which are frequently overlooked by social scientists are education and social recognition. Without these qualifications, people are hardly able to reach the top of the elite pyramid.

For the purpose of this study, two distinct levels of elite status could be delineated. The lower level of the elite structure is seen to consist of persons who have achieved key functional roles in Singapore society. This level, which includes labour leaders, corporation presidents, members of Parliament, professionals and the like, is defined as the level of strategic elites or functional elites. The upper level of the elite structure, a much smaller group, is restricted to persons who not only fill key functional roles but are also accorded high social status in the society. Moreover, they play a direct role in making binding-decisions on the society and the nation. This select group at the apex of the elite structure is defined as the power elite. The elite concept used in this study refers to the latter. Thus the term political elite is used to refer to political leaders and similarly business elite refers to the most successful and influential businessmen and professional elite refers to the most successful and influential professionals.

Like other modern societies, Singapore has a plurality of functional elites. But the power structure is formed by a cohesive power elite which is made up of the political elite, the bureaucrats and the select professional elite. These three significant groups of elite form the power pyramid. The term 'select professional elite' implies that not all the professional elite qualify for inclusion in the power elite. Only those who are sponsored by the political elite and who share with them the same political ideologies, interests and objectives can be recruited into the power elite. Many political elites are also qualified to be classified as professional elites. The number of professional elites who are not political members but recruited into the power elite

is, however, relatively small. Thus the political elite and the bureaucratic elite are the two dominant groups of elite which form the power elite in Singapore society. This phenomenon is, however, relatively new and has been institutionalized only recently. In the following sections, we will deal with the changes in the structure of the elite and the role of the elite in the national development of Singapore.

## II. Counter-elites and Pressure Groups

Over the past two decades, Singapore has experienced rapid social, political and economic changes. Politically it changed from a British colony to the status of internal self-government in 1959 and then to an independent nation in 1965. It has also shifted from a multi-party system to a one-party system in Parliament. Economically, it transformed its economy from a basically entrepot economy to a manufacturing-industry-service economy. Sociologically, it shifted from a loosely-structured, laissez-faire society to a planned welfare state. In the process of these changes, elites, especially the political elite, have played a significant role. The social composition of elites and their functions in national development, however, have changed drastically during the period under investigation.

If we accept the definition of elites as defined in the first section of this paper, we can then make a broad assumption that elites have played the major role in national development in the Republic only after 1963 and that the role of elites, especially that of the political elite and the bureaucrats, has drastically increased in importance since 1968.

Until 1963 it was the pressure groups and the counter-elites, rather than the elite, who exerted influence upon the Government. Pressure groups may compose elites, but not necessarily so. Students and workers were, among others, the important pressure groups during the 1950s. They played the major role in pressing for social and political changes.

Generally speaking, before the Second World War, the only pressure groups able to exert an effective influence upon the Colonial Government were those with business ties in the United Kingdom. These groups were largely composed of English-speaking British subjects and of exceptionally wealthy Chinese-speaking businessmen. After the Second World War, disparities and conflicts between English-speakers and non-English-speakers were increasing. The non-English speakers, especially the Chinese-educated, became politically more active. Students and workers became the most active and the most important pressure groups during the mid-fifties. By 1955, pressure groups dominated by non-English-speakers actually came to overshadow the English-speaking groups in influencing both governmental policies and the success of political parties. As put by Robert Gamer, "were it not for the emergence of this pressure group activity among non-English-speakers, it is unlikely that Singapore would have attained independence."

During the period 1955-1963, trade unionists emerged as the major pressure group who exerted influence upon the Government and political parties. The People's Action Party (PAP), when in opposition from 1954 to 1959, had a strong pro-labour bias and was practically dominated by trade unionists though the professional elite also played an important role in the party. There was close co-operation between the Government and the trade-unionists between 1959 and 1961. However, this close co-operation was short-lived. In 1961, a split took place in the ruling PAP. The dissidents formed another political party, the Barisan Socialis, which took with them 80 per cent of the membership and 35 of the 51 branch executive committees.<sup>8/</sup> A similar split also took place in the trade union movement. The Singapore Trade Union Congress (STUC) was divided into two factions. The dissidents who called themselves left-wing trade unionists formed another federat

<sup>8/</sup> Ooi Joo-Bee and Chiang Hai Ding, eds. Modern Singapore (Singapore: University of Singapore Press, 1969), p. 198.

<sup>9/</sup> Pang Chen Lian, Singapore's People's Action Party (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 14.

the Singapore Association of Trade Unions (SATU). The right-wing unions went with the ruling PAP and formed the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC).

In the 1963 election, the PAP won 37 of the 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly and again became the ruling party. The PAP Government has since then taken a strong stand to stabilize the labour situation and put great pressure against the left-wing trade unions. The Government also deregistered many trade unions who were sympathetic with left-wing parties and arrested their leaders on various charges. Party or pressure group leaders and students participating in undersired activities were detained or deported. This led to the walk-out of the Legislative Assembly by the Barisan Socialis in 1965 and the taking of their campaign "to the streets". The new political development in 1965 marked the end of the influence of pressure groups, especially that of students and workers. In the 1968 election, the PAP won overwhelmingly all the 58 seats and thus began the one-party system in Parliament.

With the attainment of political independence in 1965, Singapore had to solve the problems of the sagging entrepot trade, the growing population, the acute shortage of urban housing, and the inherent problem of unemployment. These problems were not new for Singapore, but only after the separation from Malaysia have they become more pressing. All these problems have forced the Government to explore new directions and strategies for development and to formulate policies which would result in rapid industrialization.

With the increasing awareness of the struggle for political and economic survival on the one hand and the decline of political influence of the pressure groups on the other, Singapore has since shifted its emphasis from political development to economic development. As a result, elites, especially the political elite, emerged to replace the pressure groups in playing the major role in national development. This tendency becomes more obvious when we discuss the changing structure of

elites and the emergence of the economic-bureaucratic elite in the following sections.

### III. The Changing Structure of the Power Elite

During the pre-independent period, Singapore put its main effort on political development. The ruling party has since 1963 made every attempt to stabilize the political situation, to narrow differences of political ideologies and attitudes and to reduce conflicts of various interest groups. These goals had more or less been achieved in 1968. Since then, the Government has been able to concentrate its efforts on social and economic development.

Following this new trend of development, there were significant changes in the pattern of the elite in the Republic. Firstly, there was a drastic decline of the role of counter-elites and interest groups in the decision-making process. Counter-elites and pressure groups could play an important role in influencing decision-making process if one or more of the following conditions existed: where there is lack of a cohesive power elite, where there is a strong multi-party system, where there is a force powerful enough to generate different ideologies and conflicting interests into political actions, where the ruling party cannot generate the masses to support the national goals and objectives set up by the Government, and where there is a strong foreign control of the Government. None of these conditions exists, to-day, in the Republic. Consequently, the political elite has emerged as the most important elite group in the power structure. As defined earlier, political elite refers to influential political leaders. Theoretically speaking, political leaders include leaders of both the ruling and the opposition parties. However, at this particular instance, there are practically no opposition leaders who can exert any influence upon the national decision-making process so that according to our definition they are not qualified for inclusion in the political elite. The political elite at the present stage mainly consists of the political leaders of the ruling party.

The social composition of the political elite changes from time to time. As expressed by the chairman of the ruling party, "We owe the people a duty for providing continuing political leadership and thereby political stability for Singapore. For this reason we have to take stock from time to time of the political manpower which can be dedicated to the service of the people of Singapore."<sup>10/</sup> The 1970 by-election provides a good example. Five members of Parliament of the ruling party agreed to step down so that the party could bring new talent and experience into Parliament. Three university dons, one top civil servant and one technical assistant were chosen to fill the posts.

At present, professionals, intellectuals and trade union leaders form the backbone of the power elite. Of the 65 members of Parliaments, 10 are executives of the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), and 11 are from the two universities. At one stage, it was even suggested that a number of seats in Parliament should be reserved for universities and colleges "to promote the growth of an intelligent, constructive Opposition."<sup>11/</sup> However, the role of the university dons in the power system should not be over-estimated. In fact, very few university members are able to be included in the core of the power elite. It should be noted, moreover, that not all members of Parliaments qualify for inclusion in the power elite; a very rough estimate is that about one-third could be considered.

The second major group of the power elite is the newly emerging civil bureaucrats. These include the permanent secretaries, chairman and directors of statutory boards and other top civil servants. The factors affecting the increasing importance of the role of the bureaucrats will be dealt with in the next section. The third group of the power elite is the select professional elite, which includes the intellectuals.

<sup>10/</sup> Alex Josey, The Singapore General Elections 1972 (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1972), P. 47.

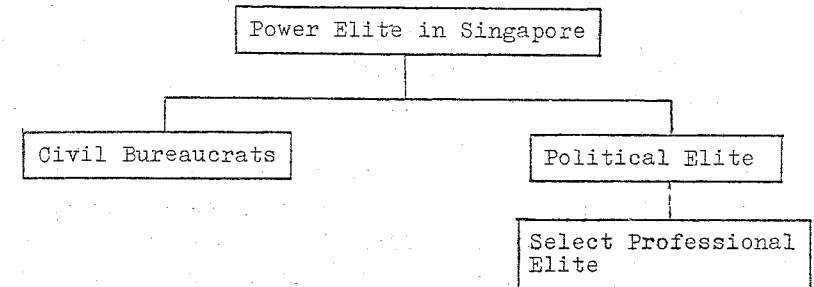
<sup>11/</sup> The Straits Times, 4 September 1972.

For the purpose of the study, professionals who are also political leaders are then considered as political elites. Therefore, the number of professional elites who are not political members and are recruited into the power elite is relatively small. Only a few professional elites who are sponsored by the political elite and who share with them the same political ideologies, interests and objectives can be recruited into the power elite.

In conclusion, we may say that the three most important groups of elite, which form the power elite in Singapore, are the political elite, the civil bureaucrats and the select professional elite. As pointed out earlier, the number of professional elites who are not affiliated to political parties and are recruited into the power elite is very small, and the political elite and the civil bureaucrats are the two most significant and powerful groups which form the power elite. The select professional elite is on the periphery; members requires the sponsorship of the political elite (see diagram page 11). It is interesting to note that the military and the business elite do not come in the scene of the power structure in Singapore Society. In most other countries, both developed and developing countries, these two groups of people are the significant groups of power elite, e.g. in the United States, Thailand and Indonesia.

The significant characteristics of the power structure in Singapore can be outlined as follows: first of all the power system is governed by a strong, cohesive and homogeneous power elite. The nature of the homogeneity refers to their political ideologies, interests and objectives, regardless of their socio-economic background.

Secondly, in addition to the uniformity and homogeneity of the power elite, members of the power elite in Singapore in general possess excellent quality in terms of their achievement, expertise, leadership ability, education and social recognition. Moreover, the two most powerful groups of the power elite, the political elite and the civil



bureaucrats, have close co-operation and understanding. Consequently, the Government can usually achieve a high efficiency and effectiveness in planning and implementing projects and activities for national development.

Thirdly, the present power elite are in general development-oriented men. The development-technocrats play a crucial role in the decision-making process. Therefore, Singapore tends to shift from a loosely-structured laissez-faire society to a planned welfare state. Under this particular circumstance, planning usually comes from the top. It is possible, and sometime it is necessary, to make planning merely from the directives of the top. However, there is a danger that this trend might result in an alienation of the power elite from the masses unless there is an efficient co-ordinating mechanism at the middle level which can play a role in bridging the gap between the power elite and the masses.

Fourthly, professionals may play an important role in the decision-making process if they are sponsored by the political elite and co-opted by the Government. However, in most cases the professionals are co-opted to support the ruling elite without themselves having a political role to play. Under this situation, professionals can be said to have some influence but certainly no political power. The service functions of professionals are maintained, but the direction of their services has largely changed. Thus, the professional elite, though representing the most modernized section of a society, tend to become a conservative force.

Fifthly, a cohesive and homogeneous power elite will function effectively if there is a strong and powerful political leadership of which the political leaders are dedicated and committed to the service of the people. Otherwise, if the political elite and the bureaucrats share the same interests and take turns to scratching each other's back there will be abuse of power and avenues for corruption. This was the case in Thailand before the October uprising in 1973 when the military and the civil bureaucrats mutually depended on each other and corruption became a social norm. As pointed out by Syed Hussein Alatas, it is generally admitted "that" corruption is an age-old problem and that all human societies, except the very primitive, are, to some extent, in varying degrees, affected by corruption.<sup>12/</sup> Fortunately, Singapore has a strong, powerful and efficient political leadership and has won the reputation of being a corruption-free society. Moreover, the Government has always been very concerned with this problem and has made every attempt and taken strong actions against corruption. A Minister of State and a project officer of the Economic Development Board (EDB) facing charges of corruption in court recently are good examples of the Government's intolerance towards corruption.<sup>13/</sup>

#### IV. The Emergence of the New Bureaucratic Elite

During the colonial period, the power hierarchy was made up of colonial rulers, the bureaucrats, the business elite and certain pressure groups. The pattern of power structure had drastically changed after Independence in 1965. Some groups of elite were replaced by others. At present, the power elite in Singapore is made up of the political elite, the bureaucrats and the select professional elite. The civil bureaucrats remain one of the significant groups of the power

<sup>12/</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Sociology of Corruption* (Singapore: Donald Moore Press Ltd, 1968), p. 15.

<sup>13/</sup> *The Straits Times*, 20 April and 23 May 1975.

elite. However, the nature and social composition of the civil bureaucrats have changed. Expatriates were replaced by local people; traditional colonial bureaucrats were substituted by technocrats; and multilingual personnel emerged to replace mono-lingual bureaucrats.

One significant trend is that the role of this newly emerging economic-developmental bureaucrats in the power structure has increased tremendously. This is mainly attributed to the following factors: (1) the rapid process of bureaucratization after Singapore achieved internal self-government in 1959; and (2) the growth of government participation in economic enterprises.

As discussed in the preceding sections, Singapore has shifted from a laissez-faire society to a planned welfare state. In the process of this change, the Government has enlarged its activities in various aspects of social and economic development, especially in education, public housing, medical service and social welfare programmes. During the period, 1960-1974, the private-consumption expenditure increased 264 per cent, whereas the Government consumption expenditure increased 532 per cent at constant prices. The public housing programme can be taken as an example. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was set up in 1960 to undertake the public housing programmes. After 15 years, Singapore, today, has more than 48 per cent of its population living in public housing estates. It is estimated that by 1980 this will have increased to 70 per cent.

The expansion of government activities entails the need of more institutions and more civil bureaucrats. Moreover, because of the emphasis on development, more professionals, technocrats and organization men are needed and are recruited into the public sector. While the political leaders set up the objectives and goals of a plan, the bureaucrats are responsible for implementing it. Political leaders are usually transferred from ministry to ministry, but bureaucrats often remain in the same positions for a longer period of time. Therefore,



the continuity of the functions of the bureaucrats is ensured.

The Singapore Government has over the last few years become the most important entrepreneur in the Singapore economy and this increasing participation of the Government in economic enterprises has tremendously increased the scope of power of the civil bureaucrats.

When the Economic Development Board (EDB) was established in 1961 to promote economic development, its functions included granting loans to private firms and participating in companies through equity. In 1968, the functions of the EDB were redistributed to the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) for project and site development, the Development Bank of Singapore which took over the financing functions, and Intraco, a state trading company which took over the Export Promotion Centre. By 1971 it was estimated that the Government wholly owned 26 companies with an authorised capital of S\$670 million and partially owned 33 companies involving S\$200 million government equity capital. Through the DBS, the Government had 7 wholly owned subsidiaries and had shares in 50 other companies. Intraco had an equity investment in 20 companies.<sup>14/</sup>

Government participation in commercial companies involves participation in their administrative functioning as well, as it nominates certain top civil servants to sit on the various Boards of Directors. Moreover, the same individuals usually sit on several Boards, making the extent of interlocking between companies very great. A study made by Lee Yoke Teng pointed out that in December 1971 there were altogether 188 directors sitting on 47 company boards. It was further pointed out that the ultimate control of all companies and the most important ones were in the hands of a few persons.<sup>16/</sup>

<sup>14/</sup> Chan Heng Chee, *op. cit.* pp. 18-19.

<sup>15/</sup> Lee Yoke Teng, "Foreign Borrowing and Investment Policy of the Public Sector Funds," Department of Economics University of Singapore, Academic Exercise, 1973.

<sup>16/</sup> For example, George Bogaars held seven directorships, Sim Kee Boon ten, Ngiam Tong Dow seven, J.Y.M. Pillay six, Ong Kah Koh six and Pang Tee Pow five.

The growth of government activities in economic enterprises and the concentration of a few top civil servants in charge of these activities have consequently enlarged the scope of power and the role of the bureaucrats. The main danger in this trend is, as warned by Chan Heng Chee, "the emergence of a group of men who can wield the power and privilege without accountability to the public and who may eventually become the real rulers of the country."<sup>17/</sup> This danger, however, will not occur if there is a strong and effective political leadership which can exert authority and control over the bureaucrats.

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<sup>17/</sup> Chan Heng Chee, *op. cit.* pp. 25-26.

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