The Formation and Characteristics of the Technocratic Regime in Singapore

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Abstract: **The technocratic regime in Singapore gradually formed as Singapore faced numerous difficulties after independence. Through its development, Singapore's technocracy has been characterized by a close relationship between technocracy and politics, technocracy associated with pragmatism, elitism, and meritocracy. This article focuses on clarifying the formation process and characteristics of Singapore's technocracy to highlight its imprint on Singapore's development today.**

Keywords: **Technocratic regime, Singapore technocracy.**

I. INTRODUCTION

A technocratic regime is a governance system in which rules are based on criteria deemed impartial and objective, derived directly or indirectly from fields such as economics, management, law, medicine, and engineering [1], and can transcend subjective political considerations and local interests. The technocratic regime in Singapore fits this pattern.

II. CONTENT

1. The Formation of Singapore's Technocratic Regime

Singapore is a country in Southeast Asia, consisting of a main island (Singapore Island) and several smaller islands in the south of the Malacca Peninsula (Malaysia) with an area of 692.7 km2. Singapore and Malaysia are connected by a causeway across the Strait of Johor, which was ruled by the British as a unified territory, with Malaya as the landmass and Singapore as the administrative and commercial center. In 1963, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia. In July 1964, there were repeated racial riots between Malays and Chinese in Singapore. The ruling party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), was adamant about a Malay-dominated Malaysia. This was followed by fundamental policy disagreements between Singapore and the federal government. Unexpectedly, on 9 August 1965, Singapore separated as an independent nation through an act formally separating it from the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore was forced to separate from Malaysia. Singapore became a country of islands without a landmass, a heart without a body [2].

"Singapore has no history! Singapore's history begins right now!" became the slogan of the people of Singapore when independence came to them in August 1965.

Some countries achieve independence from the moment they are founded, while others have to fight for it. Singapore, on the other hand, was forced into independence after two years of joining the Federation of Malaysia.

The newly formed republic had to face serious and urgent economic and security issues, with a collapsed industry, unemployment, aDnd a difficult standard of living for its people. More than 70% of the population lived in shabby huts, and its culture, education, and healthcare were backward. Religious and racial conflicts were rampant, and labor and student movements erupted continuously.

At that time, the survival of Singapore seemed like a distant prospect to many observers, who predicted that Singapore would have to find a way to rejoin Malaysia under imposed conditions. Foreign press had made predictions about the future of Singapore. Danis Warner wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald (published on August 10, 1965): "An independent

Singapore is not regarded as it was three years ago. There is nothing in the current situation to suggest it could survive any better than before". In the Sunday Times in London (August 22, 1965), Richard Hughes wrote, "The Singapore economy will collapse if the British bases – worth over 100 million pounds – are closed."

Despite all these difficulties and challenges, Singapore stood firm and developed. In a short time after gaining independence, from a poor country, Singapore quickly rose to become an Asian tiger. Singapore's success is considered a miracle in the modern world development history. It is both a founding member of ASEAN and one of the major global trade and service hubs in international exchanges, serving as the gateway to the Strait of Malacca and the bridge between Asia and Oceania.

Singapore's success is examined from both its favorable geographic location and terrain, which made it one of the largest ports in the world, and the role of the Singapore Government – a government admired for its integrity and efficiency. The country's technocratic talent-based governance system is considered a defining feature of the Singaporean state.

For a country with limited natural resources and poor conditions at the time of independence – economic instability, community tensions, and social unrest – rapid economic development was an absolute necessity. Accordingly, the People's Action Party (PAP) government embarked on a strategy of industrialization and modernization. To meet this requirement, the leadership renewal process had to be a carefully planned activity. Leaders needed to ensure that the main goals of state policy and the general strategies to achieve those goals were the only strategies suited to Singapore's reality. Therefore, it was essential to have a generation of leaders with the capability, skills, and technocratic management ability to effectively pursue these policies and goals.

The selection of technocratic elites for leadership positions in Singapore was determined by the task the government faced, which required expertise. Technocratic elites were qualified to contribute to the government through their knowledge of management techniques and administrative skills. The selection of technocratic elites in Singapore took place in a context where the country did not have traditional political elites, nor had an established military force, so Singapore's top leaders believed it was better to start with intellectual ability and combine it with a political consciousness, rather than the reverse.

In the first thirty years after gaining independence, social scientists dominated the field of research on Singapore, producing a large volume of materials on the political, economic, and social development of the new republic. In the 1970s, some experts and scholars were brought into the cabinet. By the end of the decade, some capable technocrats had risen to top leadership positions and were appointed to political positions, such as Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam, who were promoted to Deputy Prime Minister, and two newly appointed ministers who were young technocrats, in line with the vision set forth by Lee Kuan Yew. With the clean and efficient technocratic image, the PAP became the ruling party of Singapore, leading the country through the difficult early days of independence and bringing it to the level of development it enjoys today.

2. Characteristics of the Technocratic System in Singapore

Singapore is often regarded as a global model of a technocratic system that is moderated by democratic principles [3] (Khanna, 2017: 19)

The technocratic orientation of Singapore is embedded in the leadership direction of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Singapore has about 20 registered political parties, with typically 4 to 6 parties competing in each election. The People's Action Party (PAP) was elected to power in 1959 and has been the ruling party in Singapore ever since [4]. Thus, Singapore follows a multi-party system with one dominant party. The PAP supports elitist rule [5], the PAP's goal is to ensure the country's survival in the early days of independence. Therefore, after forming the government, their initial priority was to address the urgent issues facing the country at that time and to carry out the process of industrialization.

The PAP is fully aware that the longevity of any political party depends on its ability to renew itself. New talents, highly qualified individuals, must be recruited and nurtured; conservatives must be required to step down, if necessary. The leadership renewal process must be a carefully planned activity. The leaders are completely convinced that the key objectives of state policy and the general strategies to achieve these goals are the only strategies that are in line with the reality of Singapore. Therefore, it is essential to have a leadership generation with the necessary skills, abilities, and technocratic management capacity to effectively pursue these policies and goals. In the competition between political parties, the PAP has always believed and acted on the principle that the party that recruits "the smartest and best people will prevail." [6].

2.1. Singapore's Technocracy is Closely Linked to Politics

The distinction between the PAP and the Singapore government is quite blurred. Under PAP's leadership, the Cabinet serves as the central body for discussing ideas and developing policies, without using the party or parliament as a forum for policy discussions. PAP leaders view the party as a key national institution, not just a regular political party, and when referring to PAP, it essentially means referring to the government.

Singapore has made a unique breakthrough in the technocratic system. Like classical technocratic ideals, Singapore's form of governance considers itself above local interests and ideologies, but it goes beyond the classic model by acknowledging and embracing the crucial role of political leadership. It reduces the tension between politics and technocracy by incorporating technocratic ideas into the broader ideal of "elite." The distinction between political leadership and administration is blurred but not erased. Both political leaders and senior officials are required to have high-level leadership and management skills, viewing these as two aspects of the same skill set. The ideal figure in this "elite" concept is not a bland technocrat but a highly educated, proactive, courageous problem-solver, politically astute, and capable of leading the people, whether they are civil servants or politicians.

A technocratic system is a governance framework where rules are based on objective, fair criteria that directly or indirectly stem from principles such as economics, management, law, medicine, and engineering. In Singapore, the technocratic elite is granted a special honorary position at the highest executive levels, enabling them to rise above subjective considerations of politics, ideology, and sectional interests. "The elite is suitably 'protected' against the rest of society and is able to perform its tasks efficiently" [7]," as Lee Kuan Yew asserted: "protecting civil servants from political interference… giving them the space to find rational, effective solutions to our problems" [8] so that they can practice public administration in almost laboratory conditions.

2.2. Singapore's Technocracy is Tied to Pragmatism

Pragmatism is understood as being practical or useful, relating more to real-world applications than to theory or speculation.

Lee Kuan Yew described the PAP's approach as "rational", meaning the selection of the most feasible course of action, without allowing any option to be dismissed due to doctrinal reasons. There are two aspects to the pragmatism of the PAP. One is a commitment to rationality and practical outcomes, answering the question, "Does it work?" The other is a tactical aspect, which involves pragmatism based on "purpose-driven, rational policies." This requires policymakers to engage in significant planning and quantitative analysis to supplement a strong sense of empiricism. If leaders find that a policy is ineffective or produces undesirable outcomes, the PAP will discard it without sentiment.

Skilled technocrats are those who can weigh means and ends, costs and benefits, causes and effects. However, to avoid falling into the indifference of the elite, technocrats must think with both their heads and their hearts at the same time. More precisely, they must combine democracy and data, foresight and intuition. Max Weber believed that ethical experts consider public trust and welfare as their core responsibility. They have a higher goal of improving society, not just temporarily leading it. In this spirit, technocratic leaders must embody a "talented and compassionate regime," in which officials are rewarded for demonstrating incorruptible behavior and acting in the public interest.

Thus, a good technocratic system must be utilitarian, allocating resources to achieve mobility and social benefits on a large scale. Its goal is not only to maximize wealth but also to maximize welfare – both the development (and protection) of individual freedoms and the promotion of equal opportunities and fairness. In this way, utilitarianism serves as an important bridge between democratic ideals and democracy in practice. There need not be tension between democratic means and utilitarian ends – technocrats must pay attention to both democracy and utilitarianism, and they must frequently review data reflected in results and public satisfaction. The public, equipped with real-time information, wants a voice in policy but also expects experts to provide viable policy options. An informed public may respect and trust their leaders for their competence, but they will assess them based on the effectiveness of their work, not their credentials.

2.3. Singapore's Technocracy is Linked to Elitism

Elitism is the belief that a small group of leaders is responsible for making key decisions that impact society. The leaders of the People's Action Party (PAP) are elitists. They admire the power of intellect and believe that only a few of the best and brightest can lead effectively. Similarly, they believe in logical reasoning, rationality, and the general superiority of science and technology in solving social problems.

The best illustration of the PAP leaders' elitism can be seen in the party's operational terms, particularly in the concentration of power; efforts to innovate the party by continuously replacing older Members of Parliament with the "best and brightest"

younger talents who can be recruited; and efforts to ensure smooth political succession at the highest levels to avoid the divisions and factions that typically lead to the downfall of dominant parties.

Elitism in Singapore's technocratic system is manifested in several policies, such as the commitment to talent recruitment based on merit, applied to the recruitment process; and in the government's determination to pay extremely high salaries to ministers and government officials. PAP leaders pragmatically believe that the only way to attract the nation's scarce talents into the government and top civil service levels is to offer salaries competitive with the private sector, and that such high salaries can help prevent corruption. Elitism in Singapore can also be recognized in the leadership style of PAP leaders and their behavior. They accept that being the "best" comes with the responsibility of being the most competent and ethical, and leading by example. Goh Chok Tong noted, "If the beams at the top are not straight, the beams below will surely bend."

2.4. Singapore's Technocracy is Linked to Meritocracy.

Singapore's meritocratic system asserts that an individual's social and professional position is determined by their personal achievements, rather than political or economic influence, or their background in terms of race, class, or family. In this system, those who make meaningful contributions to the country's welfare are rewarded significantly. "The meritocratic system is an integral part of Singapore's political structure." [9]

The small size and limited population of Singapore have influenced the implementation of the meritocratic policy. With a small population and a limited pool of talent, ministers and government officials often take on two or more roles simultaneously. A minister may hold a senior position in one ministry while also holding a subordinate position in another. However, this has provided an opportunity for talent development in Singapore, as taking on multiple roles allows ministers to gain experience and broaden their perspectives—qualities that Singaporean leaders highly value.

Lee Kuan Yew believed that the survival of Singapore entirely depended on the integrity, performance, and work ethic of the ministers, senior officials, and the technocratic elites within the government. It was illogical to let the entire population vote on difficult and important decisions, as some of them might lack understanding or be self-interested. The logical way to make the right decisions was to select intelligent and capable individuals, who were well-educated, trained, and dedicated [10]. With that view, he gathered the best people to work for the government, creating a superior and very effectively managed administrative apparatus.

Singapore's current political leadership reaffirms the belief that the country's prosperity depends on the ability and effectiveness of a limited number of managers. The Prime Minister explained: "The outstanding men in the civil service, police, armed forces, the chairpersons of statutory committees, and their senior managers have carefully studied the policies set by the government and supervised their implementation. These individuals come from poor and middle-class families. They come from different language schools. Singapore is a meritocratic regime. These men have risen to leadership through their own efforts, hard work, and high performance. Together, they form a solid and closely coordinated group." [11]

Singapore's meritocratic system is reflected in the country's technocratic orientation. A technocratic system, or government of technocrats, means that policy-making in Singapore is carried out by individuals with specialized skills obtained through advanced education. The individuals at the top of the civil service ladder are those most involved in general management and policy development, and their work processes are thoroughly and closely reviewed and evaluated. The search for and implementation of the best ideas takes place within a meritocratic system, which is why meritocracy is considered the lifeblood of Singapore's technocratic system.

The People's Action Party (PAP) has always supported integrity and anti-corruption, symbolized by the white uniforms that PAP members wear on official occasions. The reason Singapore offers the highest salaries for ministers and senior civil servants is to attract and retain capable candidates under the meritocratic system, and to eliminate even the slightest temptation for corruption. [12]

Singapore is a strict meritocracy where the civil service is organized according to the principles of discipline, efficiency, rationality, and competence. Civil servants in general, and technocratic elites in particular, are recruited, promoted, and appointed based not only on academic qualifications but also on practical abilities and expertise. Additionally, all senior officials are required to undergo mandatory and continuous training throughout their careers.

Although the principle of promotion based on merit and performance seems fairer than other criteria, there are some drawbacks. For instance, the evaluation of job performance may not always be objective, or the meritocratic system may reward certain types of talent (e.g., academic achievements) while potentially overlooking other types (e.g., creativity).

Ultimately, the meritocratic principle, as part of the elitist ideology, is considered to potentially increase social and economic inequality, as well as ethnic disparities.

To address these shortcomings, Singapore's leaders assert that the talent-based system, ideally, is not discriminatory based on race or class. This has allowed the brightest students to rise to the top and make significant contributions to the establishment of an effective, corruption-free civil service. In addition to focusing on academic achievements, the Singapore government has also rewarded talents in the arts and sports. Moreover, the PAP government recognizes that the talent-based system may exacerbate inequality, and thus, the government has initiated several programs to help redistribute wealth.

Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country. The ethnic groups include Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and others. Four official languages are maintained and taught in schools: Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English. From its inception, the PAP has strongly promoted a policy of ethnic tolerance and issued sanctions against the use of racially or religiously inflammatory statements. Multiculturalism, similar to "multiculturalism", means respecting and tolerating all ethnic groups and cultures represented in society, as well as ensuring equality before the law. The concept of meritocracy aligns with this by basing rewards on achievements rather than race or culture. Implementing meritocracy aims to create a unified Singapore with national cohesion.

III. CONCLUSION

From a poor transit city, Singapore has made efforts to become an industrialized nation after independence. When it first separated from Malaysia, an administrative apparatus to implement and gradually design government decisions quickly and effectively was a basic requirement for Singapore's political survival and later national development.

Singapore needed a group of the most talented individuals to establish a good government to shape everything for the public. Singapore's elite management system has led to an effective and modern technocratic leadership style. However, a question raised by the public is whether the elite has truly lived up to its excellence? And whether honest and capable leaders are immune to the allure of excessive self-pride, and whether a "meritocratic system and extreme competition could lead to a winner-takes-all society, where the winners don't consider the needs of others?" These questions necessitate that Singapore finds solutions with a less pragmatic approach and needs a clearer ideology to ensure the country's development in the future.

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