

BOOK REVIEWS

***Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore.* By Beng-Huat Chua.** London and New York: Routledge, 1995. 235 pp.

Most chapters in this book have appeared elsewhere, but the conversion to a single volume has been smoothly made. It assesses, with insight, “the ideological trajectory of Singapore under the PAP regime” (p. 4). The PAP (People’s Action Party) rejects Western liberalism; nevertheless, it does not rule mainly by force. Its legitimacy is achieved largely through its ideological efficacy (p. 37). The author adopts a neo-Marxist approach. He cites Gramsci’s view that the rulers’ achievement of hegemony/consensus does not operate only at the level of ideas, but is necessarily supported by their ability to improve the “... material life of the governed ...” (pp. 3, 10). The PAP is well known for having achieved the latter; Chua has undertaken to explore the former.

He traces the course of PAP ideologies from 1965, when Singapore had statehood thrust upon it. Pressing problems abounded, notably potential external threats, communism, ethnic tensions, and the need — now that it was separated from Malaysia — to establish a viable economic system. The first steps were to promote economic development and, its twin, political stability (pp. 49–50). Economic development required industrialization which, in turn, required foreign investment and the co-operation of labour. The aim of economic development was expressed in an ideological concept, “pragmatism” (p. 50).

The author contends that governmental intervention in the name of pragmatism has been excessive and not always successful. A well-known scheme to encourage graduate (and some other) married

women — through financial and other inducements — to bear more than two children not only offended some of those affected but also forced the government to make trade-offs between increasing the skilled work-force and increasing the supply of future mothers whose genes had high credentials (pp. 21–22).

There were other criticisms of the PAP's "pragmatic" policies. Two concerned reversals of policy which, even if warranted by changing conditions, were hard for electors to understand. Measures to limit population growth in the 1960s were later revised when estimates indicated that the population would decline early in the next century. (Perhaps the switch should have been made more quickly?) The second was the "wage-correction policy" — designed to raise wages — which was partly responsible for intensifying the severity of economic recession in the mid-1980s (p. 165). Yet the government's economic successes, especially in providing new housing, led to it being accorded a high degree of legitimacy and autonomy. Social control by the government was acceptable because it had established hegemony/consensus (pp. 10, 106, 128–29). The author contends that, although pragmatism is unlikely to be discarded completely, it is now a less reliable basis for hegemony/consensus (p. 147). By the 1980s, policies founded on it were receiving less electoral support. The 1984 election was a sombre event for the PAP. In contested seats, its popular vote fell from 75.5 per cent (in 1980) to 63 per cent; it again diminished (marginally) at the 1988 and 1991 elections.

A new component was added to the PAP's ideology in the 1980s. Although individualism had previously been encouraged as an incentive to strive for economic development, the government now felt that there should be a movement towards collectivism. The shift coincided with a regional reaction against Westernization — a reassertion of "Asian" values in the face of globalization (pp. 113, 118–20, 148–51), also evident in neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. For a time, the Singapore Government adopted "Confucianism" to express the new emphasis. However, there were difficulties. Its appeal to non-Chinese Singaporeans was limited. In addition, although Confucianism has been regarded as an important element in the cultural roots of China, Japan, Korea, and other countries, attempts at interpreting its current relevance were necessarily eclectic and controversial. As well as advocating hard work, education, collectivism and family values, Confucianism conveys overtones of hierarchy and authoritarianism, and tends to promote centralized leadership and to discourage

democratization (pp. 153–55). Confucianism was thus abandoned as an ideology, but some elements — such as collectivism and the importance of the family — were retained in a White Paper on “Shared Values”, accepted by Parliament in 1990.

According to Chua, the latest component in Singapore’s ideology is “communitarianism”, supposedly “distilled” from “Asian” traditions ... ” (p. 210), but without the authoritarian connotations of Confucianism. (It should be noted, however, that, on the whole, Asian traditions are not supportive of liberal democracy.) Chua believes that in Singapore government policies cannot be understood in terms of liberal democratic concepts (p. 37). Yet, he is encouraged, because the requisite conditions for a communitarian democracy resemble those needed for a liberal democracy. There must be a “free and clean”, one-person-one-vote, electoral process. Moreover, in order to arrive at a broad national consensus, there must be the right to form interest groups (with the right to be consulted and to contribute to consensus-formation), together with the presence of a relatively independent press (p. 201). Although Singapore now meets only the first condition, Chua agrees with Robert Scalapino that it is in transition to a communitarian democracy (p. 201). (Incidentally, communitarianism is not prominent in the PAP leaders’ discourse.)

The author is optimistic about trends towards democracy in Singapore, principally because the government has shown signs of building a “potential middle ground” (pp. 178–79). Consultation and concessions now feature more prominently in decision-making. Increasingly, the government has followed the practice of “floating” proposals to elicit discussion and agreement. (The practice is not new; omitting to discuss at length certain ideas before the 1984 election was exceptional — and disastrous for the PAP.) Before the Goods and Services Tax was implemented in 1994 (p. 96), the government not only held ample consultations, but it also went to extraordinary lengths to offset its impact on a large range of groups who would be affected. On the other hand, governing Singapore is becoming more complex, as society changes. Social differentiation has reached the point where the range of demands from groups has widened, and the government, in order to deal with them, will have to weigh numerous costs and benefits, as well as focus attention more scrupulously on issues of social equity and justice (p. 206). In spite of these mounting challenges, Chua sees opportunities for further democratization, and thinks it likely that it might occur without “social ruptures” (p. 212).

Reservations about the book are probably inevitable, partly because it was written by a sociologist and is being reviewed by a political scientist; however, there are many points of agreement.

Starting with elections, at the 1984 election the “graduate mothers” proposal was indeed a factor. However, there were others, notably the unpopular proposal to raise the age for withdrawing Central Provident Fund savings. Perhaps the author attributes too much weight to demands for participation as a source of opposition votes (p. 7). To be sure, the emergence of a more sophisticated electorate may increase demands for participation but, perceptively, he cites other effects (p. 208). The “middle class” has greatly benefited materially from the PAP’s economic policies: might it not hope for continued advantages if it votes for the PAP?

“The middle class”, in any case, is too broad a category for analysis. The author lists four economic categories in the population (p. 95), but the 1991 elections elicited claims from even more diverse ethnic and economic groups (pp. 205–6); claimants heeded most by the government seem to have been lower-income, Chinese-educated Chinese, rather than a middle class.

More research could be done on the roles of “experts” (pp. 23, 204), ministers and civil servants. Important decisions are taken, or approved, by ministers. This is possible because Singapore is small, and because ministers are: (1) selected to be, in general, more able than civil servants; (2) trained, in a succession of increasingly responsible ministerial posts, to become more aware of popular feeling and probable popular reactions. Those who do not acquire these skills cease to be ministers — which answers the questions raised on pages 53–54.

Some criticisms are rather harsh (pp. 69–72, 164–65). Ministers commit some mistakes, but on the whole they make intelligent use of experts and statistics. Reversals of policy, such as on wage levels and population growth, constituted intelligent attempts to meet changing conditions. Singapore ministers’ performance compares well with the highest world standards. Decisions are certainly not made *ad hoc* (p. 58).

The author’s hopes for the future, especially on democratization, may derive partly from the belief that communitarianism is a more promising soil for nurturing liberal democracy than were previous ideologies. This is a possibility. For example, there may be more consultation of interest groups than before — but will consultation be accompanied by participation? On one interpretation, it might appear that under communitarianism the disadvantaged would fare better

than previously; the term might suggest that no person, or group, in the polity should be left out of consideration. Yet, in a “communitarian state” the elected political leadership may still define the national interest by fiat (p. 191); communitarianism makes it “ideologically possible to rationalize the conflation of state/government/society, which in turn justifies state intervention in social life as pre-emptive measures for “ensuring” the collective well-being ... ” (p. 210). Alternatively, some countries might slip easily into authoritarianism (p. 191). This is not probable in Singapore. At the same time, to say that in the PAP government “the umbrella, utopian element is a vision of a democratic society in the ‘final’ analysis ... ” (p. 57) is not congruent with PAP reservations about the good sense of electors. The leaders are not devotees of liberal democracy.

A further question would be: can communitarianism be as effective as economic development was in enabling the government to achieve hegemony/consensus? The author provides useful perspectives on the topic. He also thinks that the promoters of communitarian democracy have yet to work out just what it looks like (p. 200).

Other issues require clarification. For instance, it is correct that until the 1980s the PAP gave little attention to institution-building (p. 175) at the national level. However, it has long been extremely active in building institutions at grassroots level. “Good government” might be explored further. It may not be essential for economic growth, which has occurred in some corruption-ridden societies, but is desirable for promoting growth with a minimum of inequity and distortion (World Bank, *Government and Development*, 1992).

Finally, more thought might be given to “pragmatism”, which many writers have too easily accepted as the key to understanding PAP policies. Is (or was) it indeed an ideology? To sum up the account in the text, “ ... an ideological system is a loosely organized complex conceptual system”, guided by a few core concepts about how governments should deal with political problems. Additionally — to the advantage of governments — it is, in general, accepted and followed by the governed (p. 128). In Singapore, the goals of survival and economic development were subsumed in the concept of pragmatism. Some political scientists (p. 5) and social scientists (p. 68) have seen pragmatism as non-ideological, but in fact it is thoroughly ideological (p. 5).

This is an ingenious, although surely needlessly intricate, argument. Might it not be simpler to view pragmatism as entailing the use of appropriate rational, planned and coherent means for attaining ends such as survival, etc.? It is surely too devoid of values, or concepts, to

qualify as an ideology? In accord with the PAP's own use of the term, could pragmatism not be best considered as an instrument of ideology rather than as an ideology itself?

The author seems to suggest that pragmatism is not linked to principle, which would tend to equate it with expediency. Pragmatism "is governed by *ad hoc* contextual rationality ... " (p. 58); "Government intervention is ... rationalized to terms of the contingencies of a particular situation rather than on the basis of any inviolate principle" (p. 192). However, on the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that the PAP not only has basic aims, such as survival and so forth. It also has values (principles), which have become so closely associated with the pursuit of its aims that the PAP has "adopted" them. In behaving "pragmatically" (p. 50), far from acting in an *ad hoc* or uncalculating fashion, the PAP respects these values — even at the risk of losing votes. According to Lee Kuan Yew, the test of PAP policies is whether or not they are successful in achieving its objectives; it has to be pragmatic and practical and work by trial and error (*Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 6 January 1996). But this is within a framework of values, in which merit/elitism is paramount. There are others, such as hard work, thrift, opposition to welfarism, and so forth, but there is space here to consider only the first.

PAP leaders believe that the promotion of elitism/merit is particularly relevant to their own role. First Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has stated that the Cabinet "does not disagree on the fundamentals — meritocracy and good government" (*Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 25 November 1995). Unless government leaders are chosen from those best-equipped to govern, Singapore will fail to realize its potential, or may even fail to survive. This is the basis of the PAP's thinking on decision-making as being preferably "top-down" (p. 161), which is reinforced by its scepticism about the rationality of the ordinary citizen (pp. 184–85). There is no evidence that the "second-generation leaders" — whatever their initial conciliatory style — think differently. Prime Minister Goh has been insistent on the need for ministers, and top civil servants, to be given higher pay, a necessary condition for securing and retaining the best talent. In 1995, this expression of PAP values through proposals for pay raises met with widespread criticism, but the leaders were unshaken.

Elitism and the promotion of merit are applied across the board. For instance, they are the criterion in the selection of students for various school courses ("streaming") (pp. 62–63). Dedication to merit was most pronounced in the PAP attachment to the "graduate mothers"

scheme. To be sure, public opposition led to the actual scheme being dropped (p. 22). However, the policy was continued by other means. In 1987, measures (mainly financial) were introduced to encourage more births. They provided special incentives for parents with higher incomes which indirectly benefited graduate mothers. The PAP's dedication to cherished values explains its reluctance to yield to popular demands which, it thinks, might imperil the survival and prosperity of Singapore.

In spite of the differences of opinion expressed here, the book should certainly be read; it is so challenging that this reviewer would have read it almost as carefully if he had not been fortunate in having been chosen to review it.

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In Jeopardy: The Royal Navy and British Far Eastern Defence Policy, 1945-1951. By Malcolm H. Murfett. Southeast Asian Historical Monographs. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995. 178 pp.

At the end of the Pacific War, Clement Attlee's Labour government was in a dilemma. Pledged to the expensive creation of a welfare state at home and its leadership known to be anti-colonial in temperament, the government had to formulate an apparently contradictory foreign and defence policy in the Far East which would re-assert British authority, maintain harmony with its colonial allies in the region and not alienate the United States. This book is the first detailed study of the pressures and difficulties involved in the development of such a policy during the Labour Party's term of office. Murfett has made extensive use of the manuscripts in the official collections at London's Public Record Office, together with the private papers of many of the most important figures, buttressed by newspaper and scholarly sources. The author's treatment of the subject is as authoritative as is possible considering that the British Government still refuses to allow scholars access to the records of the British Defence Coordination Committee (Far East). Although those papers might show that the differences between the