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Future Proofing the Intelligent Island?
Singapore resilience as *'tahan lasak'* or *'exceedingly hardy'*

Rahil Ismail [1] and Brian J. Shaw [2*]

[1] Associate Professor, Humanities Social Studies Education (HSSE), National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 637616.

[2] *Associate Professor, School of Earth and Environment (SEE), The University of Western Australia, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia.

E-Mails: rahil.ismail@nie.edu.sg; brian.shaw@uwa.edu.au

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; Tel.: +61 8 64882527; Fax: +61 8 64881037

Abstract:

The entire hagiography of the 'Singapore Story' is one that is framed as a siege or bunker mentality of a vulnerable nation susceptible to the myriad of both internal and external security threats to national cohesion. In this context, sustainability has developed as an evolving balancing act by the dominant People's Action Party (PAP) which has governed Singapore by virtue of 'clean and strong' leadership, pragmatic policy formation and authoritative persuasion since self governance in 1959. Under the direction of the PAP, top-down or 'hard resilience' has taken precedence over bottom-up or 'soft resilience' which might be seen as the cornerstone of a healthy, organically structured civil society. Within Singapore, this soft or 'human resilience' has struggled to be recognised within a dominant operational paradigm characterised by a framework of boundaries, limits and prescribed behaviour. Yet, moving towards an increasingly globalised future, it is the latter, more inflexible top-down structures which are now perceived to sit uncomfortably within the complex and hypermobile worlds of capital, commodities and communications which in themselves can foster multiple, domestic inequities. Confronted with these forces and amidst the fading promise of the Singapore 'prosperity consensus' pact, official notions of national security have more recently embraced the wider 'threatscape' of challenges to Singapore society in calling for a higher level of community engagement within the context

of an increasingly plural and assertive society in which the government 'does not have all the answers'. This assessment was fostered by the forcefully articulated debate, assisted somewhat by a surge in social media following the relaxation of hitherto strict rules on media coverage, prior to the 2011 General Election. Grievances with the government surfaced as a delicate expression of bottom-up, or soft resilience, as popular support for the PAP dropped to its lowest level since the hotly contested 1963 elections. Certainly not an 'Arab Spring' revolt against a longstanding leadership, this was a 'Singapore-style' rebuke, not enough to overwhelm a political party that has been positively transformational but an expression of demographic change, delicate interaction and tentative negotiation of the two aforementioned and not necessarily mutually exclusive, resiliences. While the political response to this rebuke was immediate, as senior members of the government stood down from cabinet positions, this paper questions the limits to yet another potential remaking of the Singapore Story, this time within a local context of heightened expectations and a global context of sustainability amidst economic, political and social instability and unpredictability.

Introduction

The recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Perth, Western Australia, from 28 to 30 October 2011 (CHOGM 2011) was organised around the theme of 'Building National Resilience, Building Global Resilience' [1]. As an extreme example of 'hard resilience' the gathering of some fifty Commonwealth leaders, their entourages, business and community representatives, media and support staff involved thousands of local and overseas personnel and represented the greatest security operation in Western Australia since World War II. While the conference theme recognised the need to build resilient societies in order to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities presented in a global community there was no specific acknowledgement of the role played by voluntary social relations among individuals, or civil society, which might be seen as 'soft resilience' in the future proofing of global society.

The existence of social capital, expressed through voluntary associations, groups and institutions as expressions of shared interests for mutual benefit, translates as an indicator of social wellbeing that is *enhanced*, rather than being depleted, *by regular and persistent use*. Accordingly, as argued by Dani Rodrik [2], social resilience, being the ability of human communities to withstand and recover from stresses, such as environmental change or social, economic or political upheaval, is arguably strengthened by the existence of broadly inclusive, participatory communities. Such resilience is

crucial in maintaining options for positive human development in the face of rapid change within our increasingly complex and seemingly vulnerable economic, political and social systems.

Within the cross-cultural crossroads of Southeast Asia, newly emergent states have managed their inevitably plural post-colonial societies in various ways, but invariably nationalisms have been constructed with reference to indigenous majority groups rather than through the political inclusion of marginalised minorities or regional outsiders such as the ubiquitous Chinese and Indian populations. In such contexts, as Ooi has argued [3], social stability has largely been achieved through economic growth and wealth creation rather than through ethnically pluralistic fully representative governance. Hard resilience has been created in a 'top-down' fashion through governance systems based upon continued material rewards rather than community consensus. Hence, from colonial times, labour solidarity has been in thrall to ethnic identity, and when economic conditions have deteriorated in the region, as in 1969 and 1997, thresholds of tolerance have quickly been breached in 'racial riots', thus exposing the fragility of ethnic management through economic consensus [4].

Singapore, as the only Southeast Asian state with an ethnic Chinese majority, has officially developed as a 'multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-lingual secular society' (4Ms) but at the same time a place where racial ascriptions inform every aspect of people's lives. Progress has been achieved through unprecedented economic growth and an apparent political continuity which belies the frequent policy shifts instigated by the dominant People's Action Party (PAP) [5]. Hard resilience combined with astute economic management and ambitious infrastructure provision has hitherto underpinned 'Singapore Exceptionalism' to the extent that the city-state has been declared as 'quite simply the most successful society in the history of humanity' [6]. However, as evidenced in the CHOGM 2011 theme, the demands of an increasingly globalised future present challenges to national resilience, and within Singapore there is evidence that the older, inflexible, top-down structures may have to be tempered with greater levels of soft resilience by way of greater community involvement and more flexible official responsiveness to an increasing variety of public concerns.

The Singapore Story

The entire hagiography of the 'Singapore Story' is one that is framed as a siege or bunker mentality of a vulnerable nation susceptible to myriad forms of threats to its security. Geopolitical situational considerations, social-political policies and cultural societal socialisation have facilitated and replicated this psychological and operational paradigm. A 'top-heavy' approach complemented by a

'hard multiculturalism' to state management of ethnic diversity meant that new forms of 'official' resilience were created and grafted onto the existing society to steer the country since independence in 1965. The products of the 4Ms and other politically motivated actions since then were predicated on the fundamental pact between the citizenry and the government. That is selected tradeoffs between certain aspects of personal life for the general good of economic prosperity, societal stability and a promising future for succeeding generations and for all communities. This 'prosperity consensus' has indeed worked well as testified by consistently improving and globally enviable socio-economic statistics.

However, this technical approach to 'create' resilience from the 'top-down' as opposed to the natural, organic evolution from the 'bottom-up' has meant a transformation of 'natural' resilience to one functioning within a framework of boundaries and limits. Some sub-optimal outcomes have gradually emerged and these are now testing the citizen-government pact. A recent publication by Wilkinson and Pickett [7] has convincingly argued the case for equality, deeming that 'more equal' members of the world's richest group of countries perform much better than their 'less equal' counterparts on a wide range of social and economic indicators. It would appear from their analysis that community resilience is enhanced within egalitarian societies. Disturbingly, within the world's 'rich-group', Singapore has become arguably the most unequal of countries with a 2009 Gini coefficient score of 42.5, whereby the richest 20% of households command nine times the wealth of the poorest 20% [8]. The corollary to these findings is that Singapore Governance with a capital G is associated with the second highest levels of incarceration (after the US) and the second lowest levels of 'trust' (after Portugal) within the statistically defined rich group [9]. Resilience the 'Singapore Way' with its claims to a 'Singapore Exceptionalism' is being increasingly tested by the multifaceted processes of globalisation and the inevitable contradictions brought about through the complex and hypermobile worlds of capital, commodities and communications which can in turn foster multiple, domestic labour inequities

Electing for Change?

Inevitably, 'manufactured' resiliences will be tested by the passage of time and changing expectations especially when measured alongside attendant increases in individual wealth, changes in community identity, or the condition of 'being Singaporean' in itself. The forcefully articulated debate prior to the recent general elections, in particular focusing on younger people's concerns, was conducted in the context of an election which presented the highest proportion of contested seats since independence. Amid the election clamor was the constant reminder that many representatives of this group would, in a more highly contested electoral climate, be exercising their vote for the first time and might well opt

for change. Retrospectively characterised by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as 'a generation that does not remember' [10], the demographic cohort born during and after the 1980s might best be represented as 'a generation that never knew', a case of youthful folly ignoring experienced wisdom.

Ultimately, however, the impact of this demographic change, together with other expressed grievances with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), merely surfaced as a delicate expression of 'natural' or 'bottom-up' soft resilience, nothing akin to the tension of the current 'Arab Spring' as some critics had feared. While the PAP share (60.14%) of the popular vote dropped to its lowest level since the hotly contested 1963 elections, the incumbent government was still returned with 81 out of 87 parliamentary seats. This was no 'Orchid Revolution' [11] as some commentators concluded and certainly not an 'overturning' of a legacy [12]. It was however a 'Singapore way' of resilience: a rebuke articulated not enough to overwhelm the current political system that had indeed been positively transformational since 1965 but to express heartfelt, genuine concerns within the ambit of the 'prosperity consensus' pact.

Notwithstanding the contested narratives both before the elections and still currently ongoing, particularly in cyber space, the election results are positive indications of a robust democracy in action with delicate expressions of 'small g' and 'Capital G' resilience in action. The post-election analyses in prominent think-tanks [13] or within the dominant media continued as post-election official pronouncements and possibilities reverberated from the May General Elections into the August Presidential Election. In the latter the candidate most identified with the ruling PAP government won the election on a knife-edge with 0.35% (or 7,382) more votes than the second-placed candidate [14], an outcome most Singaporeans would have thought fanciful before May 2011. Throughout all this, the most popular analytically descriptive phrase of the political landscape, repeated to the point of *ad nauseam*, became the 'new normal' of both optimism and caution. The Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, in his National Day Rally Speech on 14 August cautioned Singaporeans gently on the need for balance, asking 'will our politics remain pragmatic or will we become populist?' [15]. He also made a promise to 'listen' declaring that;

> *My government will reach out to all segments of Singapore society to understand your perspectives, to share ideas and concerns with you, to work with you to come up with plans and programmes which will benefit all of us. I think there are many concerned Singaporeans who are thinking about this, even after the elections, with critical but thoughtful views.* [16]

If past carefully calibrated actions towards 'managing' Singapore and its people are any indications, there will be myriad social and economic responses to the results of the morning of 8 May (and 28 August) from both the government and the people. Undoubtedly there will be cynical doubters or realistic pessimists reacting to any significant conciliatory government gestures to embrace or 'listen' more to the groundswell of opinion, and also resistance to noteworthy policy changes and modifications. Whether the 'new normal' is merely a partial venting of significant pressure points to renew confidence and foster a positive perception of the government, or the setting for far-reaching structural reforms to address bottom-up grievances of 'heartlanders', remains to be seen in the next few years and until the next general elections.

Resilience and exceptionalism in the particular and maybe peculiar Singapore way have indeed been responsible for the country's breathtaking success since 1965, if not necessarily enough to qualify itself as the most successful community in the history of humanity. It has possessed the combined organic and official legacies that have managed, rather delicately, both the past and the present, but the future is not without uncertainty, possible tragedy or economic inevitability. In this, as the narratives continue in the 'Singapore Story', it is not vaulting ambition to suggest that Singapore 'resilience' is best expressed in the Malay phrase encapsulating endurance, substance and quality …as 'tahan lasak'.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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