

**Hussin Mutalib**, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic. 2004. 430 pp, xvii. ISBN 9812104089.

There has been a significant amount of scholarly research on Singapore, so that it is rare that something really new and innovative is written. Hussin Mutalib's *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* fills an important gap in the political science literature on Singapore. The attempt to analyse opposition parties in Singapore is not an easy topic because the government is known to employ repressive means against any kind of description of oppositional politics. Only recently a documentary film on the leader of the Singapore Democratic Party, Dr Chee Soon Juan, was banned from a film festival and later confiscated by the police. The author comments on this difficulty in the preface:

Given the wide scope of this study and, in the context of Singapore, the sensitivity of writing about the Opposition, this study has taken much longer than I originally anticipated – a laborious, and often frustrating, five years to see the final product (p. vii).

The result of Professor Mutalib's extensive research presents the reader with a truly respectable analysis of Singapore's opposition parties and the difficulties they are facing due to the paternalistic rule of the governing PAP and its associated state apparatus. In the first chapter, he places oppositional politics in the context of one-party systems. Even though he regards Singapore as a democracy, he sees it as the most illiberal on the spectrum of one-party systems. He concludes that

[I]n more ways than one, the PAP's government's peculiar policies and politics, specifically its abhorrence of a parliamentary Opposition, separates Singapore from other dominant one-party systems and illiberal democracies because in most such states, opposition parties occupy a permanent and institutionalized fixture in the country's political landscape. (p. 28)

The second part of the book develops the frame in which today's opposition parties have to operate. It delineates the rise of the PAP from its early internal struggle under British colonial rule until it finally had eliminated its last antagonist, the Barisan Sosialis, when it decided to leave politics. The chapter retells the original positions of the anti-colonial PAP. The battle against the radical left would provide the basis for later conflicts with rising opposition parties. The crucial event in this regard, Mutalib recounts, is the 'Operation Cold Store' on February 2, 1963. More than 100 people were charged with Communist activities and

jailed without trial. Many of those arrested were leaders of the Barisan Sosialis, which paralysed the only other main contender for political office at the time. This led to the party's decision to boycott Parliament and consequently disappear from politics.

The most important part of the study elaborates four case studies of oppositional parties. Extensive interviews were conducted to retell the development of the Barisan Sosialis, the Workers' Party, the Singapore Democratic Party and the Singapore Malays National Organization (PKMS). Each chapter details the beginning of the party, its development and its decline. This suggests a cyclical development of political parties, which, except for the Barisan Sosialis, may be slightly too pessimistic and too premature. The chapter on the Workers' Party demonstrates the remarkable ability of this party to survive the many adversities of Singaporean politics. As one of the longest surviving political parties (founded in 1957), the party has captured the attention of Singaporeans when it was the first opposition party to win a seat in the 1981 by-election for the Anson constituency. The author, furthermore, sees the 1984 General Elections as the watershed in Singapore's political development, which demonstrated to the ruling PAP that oppositional politics had reappeared.

While the formations and motivations of the various opposition parties differ significantly, Mutalib sees similarities in their decline. Most importantly, he emphasizes the government's tactics and strategies in diminishing or even eliminating any kind of opposition. The other denominator can be found within the political parties. The author reveals the numerous disagreements within and between different opposition parties, which often exacerbated the already stringent conditions that were set by the ruling party. The conflict between Chiam See Tong and Dr. Chee Soon Juan of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) is perhaps the most glaring example of inner-party rivalry, which led to the split of the party. The SDP consequently lost all its political campaigns in the 1997 General Election and even its two seats in Parliament.

The fourth part of the book presents the challenges a viable opposition faces in Singapore's restrictive political system. This part is comprised of four main arguments. The first discusses the problem of the weakness of opposition parties resulting from, among other things, an affluent and effective government. Mutalib states that 'It must be clear by now that an affluent Singapore is a major factor to explain the Opposition's failure to undo the PAP's popular mandate' (p. 252). Rules and regulations of the government as well as systemic obstacles to opposition

parties are another challenge. The PAP has been able to effectively use the bureaucracy, Mutalib correctly argues, to hinder political opposition. The final two arguments deal with the PAP's tactic of changing the rules, such as changes to the law, the nominated Member of Parliament or the elected presidency, and with Singapore's political culture, which is dominated by what he sees as a 'caution syndrome' and the 'subject mentality, which means that people have some knowledge of the political process but prefer not to participate in politics.

The author concludes with a rather dismal view of the future of oppositional politics in Singapore. Various scenarios, however, are suggested that could enhance the prospects of oppositional politics, such as the departure of senior political figures or economic decline. While it is true that the opposition parties must realize the changing trends in Singapore, it may be too one-sided to claim that 'otherwise, they will have nobody else to blame but themselves for their on-going state of paralysis' (p. 399). In conclusion, one can only agree with the author that hegemonic rule will not be helpful for Singapore in the long run.

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