



HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (High School Section)
INTEGRATED HUMANITIES CORE
SECONDARY THREE

WHAT IS THE SINGAPOREAN CONCEPTION OF A GOOD GOVERNMENT?

Lee Hsien Loong, Speech at the 6th Asian-European Editor's Forum, 6 Oct 2006.
Obtained from, Tan and Teo, *Constitutional Law in Malaysia and Singapore* (3rd Edition)

Good government is therefore an essential prerequisite for Asia's economic success. To cope with globalisation, countries need competent and honest leaders who can run the government machinery properly anticipate problems prepare for the future, and deliver stability and progress for their peoples. How each country does this depends on its culture and history, the structures of its society and the institutions it has evolved. The government must have legitimacy, enjoy the people's trust, and engage the energies and talents of the people to build the nation.

Many Westerners, and some Asians believe that the standard and the best way to achieve good government is through a Western style liberal democracy, such as is found in the US or Europe. But this is not a magic formula for success. In Asia, Western style liberal democracy has not always delivered stable, legitimate and effective government. The reasons are many. Many Asian countries lack a long history of shared nationhood. Some have populations which vote on racial or religious lines. Others lack firmly established democratic institutions and tradition of civilian rule.

These examples in Thailand and Indonesia show how hard it is for Asian countries to develop political systems which are well adapted to their specific circumstances, and at the same time well suited to the country's challenges. In every country, leaders and institutions that uphold the rule of law, ensure the accountability to stakeholders, and provide a voice for the people and critical aspects of good government. But unthinkingly importing institutions from the other countries and grafting them into the local political system can end up doing more harm than good.

Indeed, ensuring that Asian countries have good government is a dynamic challenge, because the situation that these countries face is not static. As their economies develop, they will increasingly need transparent government policies and the rule of law, if only to facilitate financial transactions or protect intellectual property. As new generations come of age, better educated, more exposed to the world, and with different life experiences and aspirations, they will want their say in the affairs of their countries. Leaders must be able to respond creatively to this new situation, and the political system must evolve to remain effective. Each country, including Singapore, will have to make changes in its own way and strike its own point of balance, taking into account its unique circumstances.



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What is Social Studies?

The National Council for Social Studies in the United States defines social studies as the “integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence.” In our context, Social Studies may be synonymous with Singapore Studies, with the syllabus outlining the key learning outcomes for the students.

Singapore

- Singapore is a relatively young state. In the post-Second World War era, the social, economic and political climate was rather acute. Apart from the health, housing and sanitation problems, the country was faced with massive unemployment and a rising population. These aside, there were rampant strikes and riots that were motivated through Racial/ Religious issues (as with the Maria Hertogh Riots and the 1964 Race Riots) and through Communist Influences (Hock Lee Bus Riots).
- In 1963, the leaders of Singapore had sought a Merger with the Federation of Malaya to overcome this resource limitation through an establishment of a common market. However, due to several reasons the constitutional experiment emerged as a failure leading to the expulsion of Singapore. For students of Singapore studies, it is firstly crucial to understand how the following episodes in Singapore History affected the state building and nation building efforts in an Independent Singapore. For Social Studies students, it is important to understand the changes and continuities in the policies undertaken by the government of Singapore.
- Having gained its independence in 1965, this state had to embark on a continuous process of nation building in order to preserve its **sovereignty** (independence) and continued economic growth. These functions were rather complicated in the formative years, as the newly independent country had no natural resources (apart from granite and sand) or agricultural land to speak of.
- Today, Singapore is a globalised state that has achieved a developed country status within 40 years of Independence. This is a remarkable feat. This success is attributed to the astute management of the economy coupled with the management of ethnic and religious issues. The 2 case studies of nations divided (Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland) are used to strengthen this point.

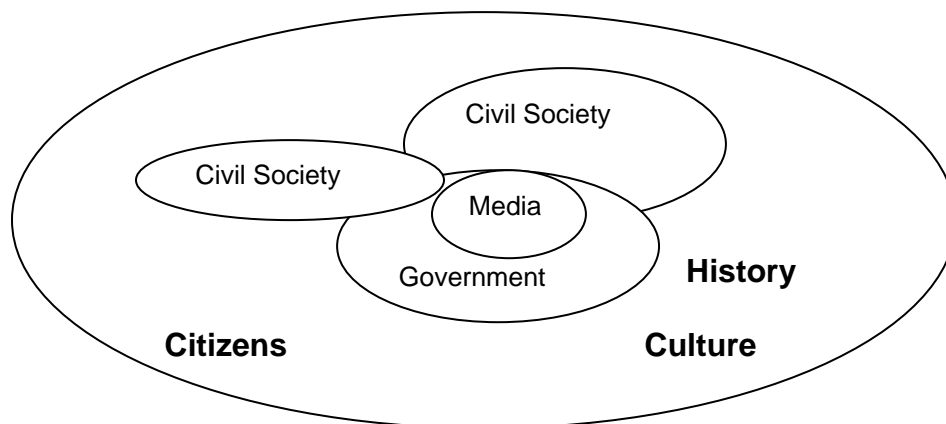
Understanding Governance in Singapore

Key components:

- Definitions (Government vs. Governance)
- The United Nations Development Program definition on Good Governance
- Political System and structure of Singapore
- Principles of Good Governance in Singapore (with examples)
 - Integrated Resorts
 - New Water
 - Scholarships
 - Progress Package
- Applying the concept of Good Governance in Singapore (evaluation of specific policies)
 - Housing
 - Education
 - Healthcare
 - Foreign Talents
 - Singapore's population policy
 - (a) Control population growth
 - (b) Encourage population growth
 - (a) Preparing for an ageing population

Key Definition: Defining Good Governance is “difficult and controversial”.

1. *Government*: Is a mechanism through which order is maintained. Without a government, lawlessness or anarchy would prevail.
2. *Governance*: According to the UN, governance is **NOT** about government. Governance is about how government and other social organizations interact, how they relate to citizens and how decisions are taken in the complex world.¹



¹ UN Institute on Governance, “Principles for Good Governance in the 21st Century” (2003), p. 1.

**The Five Good
Governance
Principles**

The UNDP Principles and related UNDP text on which they are based

**1. Legitimacy
and Voice**

Participation – all men and women should have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their intention. Such broad participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as capacities to participate constructively. **Consensus orientation** – good governance mediates differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interest of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures.

2. Direction

Strategic vision – leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development. There is also an understanding of the historical, cultural and social complexities in which that perspective is grounded.

3. Performance

Responsiveness – institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders. **Effectiveness and efficiency** – processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources.

4. Accountability

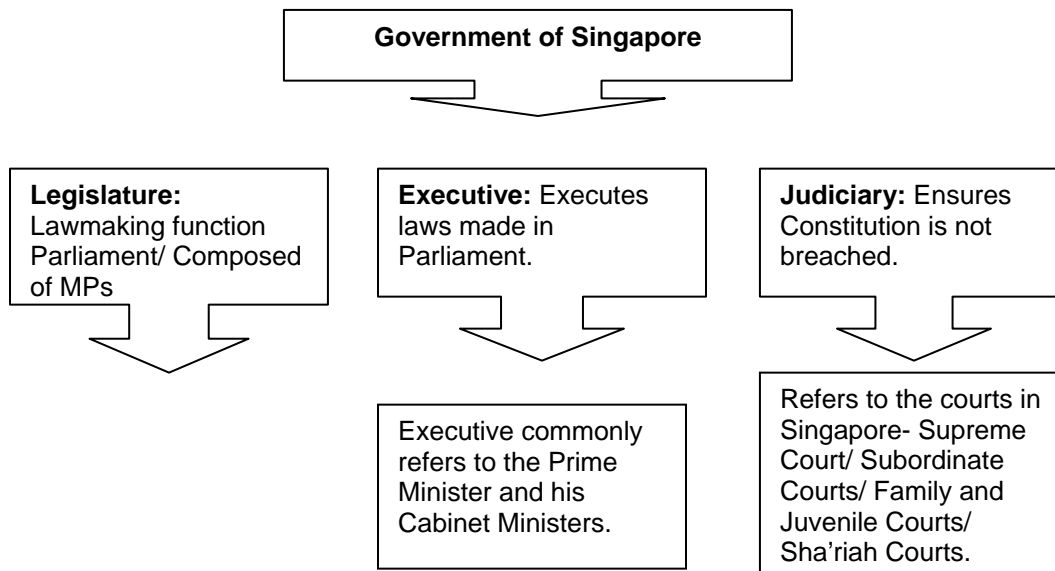
Accountability – decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organizations are accountable to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders. This accountability differs depending on the organizations and whether the decision is internal or external. **Transparency** – transparency is built on the free flow of information. Processes, institutions and information are directly accessible to those concerned with them, and enough information is provided to understand and monitor them.

5. Fairness

Equity – all men and women have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being. **Rule of Law** – legal frameworks should be fair and enforced impartially, particularly the laws on human rights.

The System of Government in Singapore

- Singapore practices a parliamentary democracy, but Singapore leaders maintain that the version of democracy practiced in Singapore has to be distinguished from other Western Liberal Democratic models.
- Parliamentary Elections are held once in 5 years, where candidates representing the various political parties (PAP/WP/NSP/SDA/SPP/SDP/RP) contest for the 87 seats in the legislature (parliament).
- In the Parliamentary System, the leader of the political party that occupied the majority of seats in the legislature is invited to become the Prime Minister, to become the head of government.



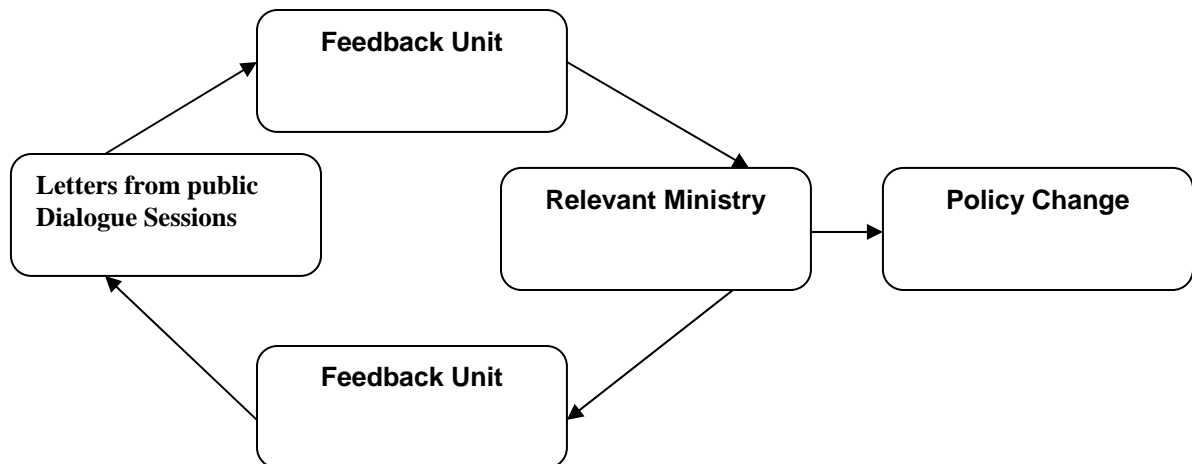
Ministries in Singapore (Institutions)

1. Prime Minister's Office (PMO)
2. Ministry Of Defence (MINDEF)
3. Ministry Of Education (MOE)
4. Ministry Of Finance (MOF)
5. Ministry Of Foreign Affairs (MFA)
6. Ministry Of Health (MOH)
7. Ministry Of Home Affairs (MHA)
8. Ministry Of Information, Communications And The Arts (MICA)
9. Ministry Of Law (MINLAW)
10. Ministry Of Manpower (MOM)
11. Ministry Of National Development (MND)
12. Ministry Of The Environment And Water Resources (MEWR)
13. Ministry Of Trade And Industry (MTI)
14. Ministry Of Transport (MOT)
15. Ministry Of Community Development, Youth And Sports (MCYS)

The Role of the President: In addition to the parliamentary elections, Singapore also holds the Presidential Elections. The President of Singapore, although elected by the people for a Five-year term of office, is a Ceremonial Head of State (not government), but its duties extend to safeguarding Singapore's Reserves and presiding over racial harmony in Singapore.

The Role of the People: A democracy necessitates that decision making and policy making has to be an open (transparent) process. In a democracy, sovereignty (or the power and responsibility) to choose the right leaders lies in the people. How else are the people involved in the decision making process in Singapore?

- When the government makes decisions, the needs and the wants of the people must be considered (e.g. housing needs, education needs etc). However, communication is not a easy process. Hence, the government of Singapore relies on **communication channels** to solicit the needs and the wants of the people. Here are some communication channels available in Singapore:
 - The Feedback Unit
 - The Forum Page of the Straits Times
 - Meet-the-People Sessions
 - E-mail/ blogs/ facebook



Key question: What is good governance in Singapore? What are the four principles of good governance in Singapore? Which principle is the most important?

Governance refers to the way a government manages its resources to carry out its legislative, executive and judicial functions. The legislature (Singapore Parliament) makes the laws. The executive (cabinet headed by the Prime Minister) executes the laws and administers government policies through the civil service. The judiciary (courts) ensures that the laws made by the parliament do not violate the constitution and the laws are carried out justly.

Leadership is Key

The pivotal/ central/ cardinal role of **leadership** in the good governance of Singapore has been endorsed by MM Lee Kuan Yew himself in many forums both domestic and foreign. His statements only serve to amplify the role of leadership in the good governance of Singapore. According to him, government leaders are human resource talents and the only resource Singapore has and its necessary that capable and talented leaders are staffed in government institutions. And because, talented leaders with integrity, moral courage and incorruptibility (e.g. Mr. Ong Teng Cheong, Mr. Goh Keng Swee) are difficult to come by, the Singapore government places a premium on selecting, grooming and staffing potential leaders for appropriate governmental roles. It is because of this principle that the leaders of the Singapore government are one of the most highly paid politicians in the world. In principle, these leaders are required to initiate/ propose/ debate/ implement even unpopular laws (e.g. ERP) that necessary for the society and the state. The necessity of good leaders are not confined to the government and administration as community leaders and trade unionist are also well regarded in Singapore. Although leadership plays an undeniable role in four principles of governance in Singapore, it not the only factor and the other 3 principles cannot be neglected.

Reward for work and work for reward (Other factor)

When applied to good governance, meritocracy is viewed as a system that rewards hard work. In the field of education for example, the principle of meritocracy is practiced in the disbursement of scholarships, where applicants are solely based on their abilities and qualifications. The same principle is applied in the civil service, where applicants are given access to appointments by virtue of their educational background and achievements. Bonuses are also awarded as recognition of their performance on the job. The rationale for meritocracy in a poly-ethnic Singapore is to ensure justice and fairness in the governance, without being overtly biased to any segment of the community.

Anticipate Change and Stay Relevant (Other factor)

The future challenges are particularly acute for a small city state with minimal natural resources to speak of. Therefore, good governance in decision making is premised on forward thinking. On this score, the New Water Project and the Integrated Resorts are cited examples how Singapore anticipates and solves future problems and remain sustainable and competitive.

A stake for everyone and opportunities for all (Other factor)

Finally, in the field of legislation, the Singapore government takes a consultative approach in seeking the view-points of the general population before making a decision. A consultative approach to good governance is employed to ensure that "there is a stake for everyone" and the voices of the citizens are considered before a policy/ law is made. This is particularly so if the policy/ legislation is a controversial one, e.g. Integrated Resort.

Conclusion

There are four principles of good governance adopted by the Singapore government, at its heart is Leadership. The other complementing principles include meritocracy, dynamism and citizen consultation. The government makes decisions based on the principles of governance. Without good leadership, no right policies can be made. Without good leaders to decide on the IR for Singapore, competitors will catch up and our economy will suffer even though we have anticipated the future challenges to our tourism. Despite the good system of meritocracy and the desire to include everyone in the decision-making, we also need the good leaders to make right decisions and hence then can they anticipate and stay relevant. Thus in this regard, leadership is the most important factor.