

Book Reviews

The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence, Michael D. Barr, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2014, 224 pp., ISBN 978 178076 234 0.

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED to figure out how Kuan-Yew Lee did it; how he and the Peoples' Action Party transformed a tiny trading town, surrounded by large, unfriendly governments into a commercial and industrial powerhouse. Barr provides all the elements for an explanation. But his conclusion—[I would describe] Singapore as “a Chinese family business, with all roads leading back to the family and the patriarch”(10)—is more than a bit overdrawn.

Lee and his son and successor as Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, are certainly the most important members of the elite. But their role is mediated by the demand for skill and competence anchored on education and experience. A true family dynasty would put members in positions of power regardless of capability. There is, moreover, no accusation of corruption, of the Lees using their political power to accumulate wealth. At best, Barr says “...the outcomes of this family business have not always been exemplary” (109).

Later in the book, Barr repeats his thesis: “...it makes it a lot easier to understand Singapore if you put aside notions of modernity and ordinary governance, let alone democracy, and begin from the premise that it is a Chinese family business, complete with a patriarch, an eldest son, *guanxi* networks and questions of cross-generational continuity” (108). But it is precisely “notions of modernity and ordinary governance,” which have to be mobilized for an understanding of the Singapore elite. By disregarding what are core concepts of state formation, Barr cannot even locate the importance of the Lees. Whatever you may accuse the Lees of, it is

undeniable that they have built a modern society with state-of-the-art governance.

Not even Barr would dispute that Singapore has been, and is today, a well-run state. It is administered by an efficient and well-organized bureaucracy. Its economic managers have run the economy past many crises and organized high levels of economic growth through many decades. Its per capita GNP is second only to that of oil-rich Brunei. It is the closest thing to a welfare state in the region, with more than 80 percent of the population living in government housing. If you do not acknowledge the Singapore leadership's high level of achievement, you will not understand the importance of education and skill in recruitment to the elite.

Singapore is a one-party state. But it is not, by any measure, a totalitarian state. It is an authoritarian state as the small opposition would certainly insist. The arrest of 22 activists in 1987 was certainly a violation of international standards of civil and political rights. If you make multiparty elections with one party succeeding another on a regular basis a condition of democracy, then Singapore is not one. Political contests for control of government occur mainly within the PAP.

As dominant as Kuan-Yew Lee was in his day, he was no dictator; his position was not unassailable. Kuan-Yew Lee has not always had his way. His colleagues, thankfully, dismantled the "...programmes that encouraged procreation among middle class, tertiary-educated (mostly Chinese) women, and sterilization among low-income, poorly educated (mostly Malay) women" (51). The decrease in the PAP parliamentary majority after the May 2011 general elections led to Lee's "untimely and sudden political decline."

Barr makes much of two other characteristics of the elite, which is mainly Chinese and consists of a relatively small circle of individuals who know each other and were educated in the same schools. Of course, the elite is Chinese; Singapore is three-quarters Chinese. The small size of the elite is also understandable because, as Barr points out, Singapore is a small island state of 3.2 million people. When you factor in education in

elite schools and a system of scholarships for selecting the brightest and most highly motivated students, the circle for recruitment is small indeed.

Barr assigns a central role to the military. “The military has, in a very real sense, provided a new cultural centre of gravity and a new standard for the elite...soldiers have come to presume a central and leading role in the civil service and politics” (85). The role of the military in Singapore is certainly different from its role in Thailand, Burma and Indonesia, where the military has at various points taken direct control of government. Barr himself says “...it might be more accurate to think of the officer corps as armed bureaucrats, rather than as soldiers” (81). I think that the military might be better seen as one more training ground for senior bureaucrats.

The problem with Barr’s framework of analysis is that he does not think Singapore is a “normal” society. Although he does not say so directly, it seems to me that Barr’s idea of a “normal” society is one that is “...becoming more like a Western, capitalist democracy” (50). If Singapore is not “Western,” it must be very tempting to take a turn towards a form of “orientalism”—towards seeing Singapore as run by a “Chinese family business complete with a patriarch, an eldest son, *guanxi* networks.”

Barr also has a problem with the fact that, whatever you call Singapore’s government, it works. It has been effective in organizing economic growth and social services for the population. But in a strange inversion of cause and effect, Barr nowhere calls Singapore a democracy. If it is effective, it must not be a democracy. Writing about Taiwan, Barr points to “...a period of indifferently effective government (which is arguably the normal state of affairs for a democracy in any case)” (139). This is not just historically inaccurate, it also pulls the rug out from democracy activists. We want both democracy and effective government.

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