

Creating a Compliant Civil Service for Nation Building in Singapore, 1959–1984

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By the time Singapore celebrated 25 years of nation building in 1984, the city-state was being praised for its “good governance” and economic achievements. However, what has constantly been overlooked is that these achievements were the result of a compliant civil service. After the People’s Action Party (PAP) was elected to office in 1959, it cracked down on its leftist political opponents and the press, while introducing “attitudinal reform” of the civil service. Civil servants learned very quickly that they were not supposed to question the wisdom of the ruling party. While Singapore today continues to highlight the Westminster system of government as a positive legacy of British colonialism, the reality is that the civil service is no longer politically neutral. This article explains how the PAP government worked to dominate the civil service in the 1960s before using it to serve its own political interests by the 1980s.

Keywords: Singapore Civil Service, People’s Action Party, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, political neutrality

1 The Civil Service and Nation Building

Singapore was a British colony until it achieved full internal self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965. The new People’s Action Party (PAP) government headed by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew first took office in June 1959, and it recognized the legacy of British colonial rule. Unlike in other emerging states in Southeast Asia, Singapore’s roads and buildings were not renamed; and the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles, the East India Company official credited with “founding” Singapore in 1819, was not torn down. The relationship between government and civil service was also acknowledged as a legacy of British colonialism. In 2019, on the 54th anniversary of Singapore’s independence, the former diplomat Tommy Koh wrote that the “positive legacy” of colonialism included “a good civil service” (*Straits Times* 2019).¹ Civil ser-

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vants, as employees of the government, work for the government and are answerable to the government. In turn, the government respects the integrity, professionalism, and political neutrality of civil servants. This model of the relationship between politicians and civil servants is based on the coexistence of a responsible government and a politically neutral civil service (Aucoin 1995).

The neutrality of the civil service is a key characteristic of the Westminster model. If they are politically neutral, civil servants are supposed to be answerable to the government, not to a political party—regardless of how long that party has stayed in power:

The public servant must abstain from any participation in the affairs of political parties while retaining the right of private discussion of political issues and of voting as he [*sic*] pleases; and second, that he is ethically and morally bound to administer the policy decisions of whichever party happens to be in power with equal zeal and determination. (Levitan 1942, 317)

However, what has not been publicly acknowledged is that after the PAP government took office in 1959, it wanted a civil service that served the party's interests so that new policies could be rushed through and implemented quickly. The result is an image of a "good governance" of the city-state that has emanated from the political will of ministers and a non-corrupt civil service (Quah 2013; 2015). Jon Quah wrote that the "effective public bureaucracy" in Singapore resembled "a good piano playing good music" (Quah 2018, 8).

The economic success and political stability of Singapore under the PAP was not about "good governance" but the forceful domination of the first generation of PAP leaders over the civil service from 1959 to 1984. The PAP's success in implementing its programs came after forcing civil servants to recognize the supremacy of political leadership. Bureaucrats were largely excluded from any discussions about public policy, and they had to unquestioningly implement policies decided by ministers outside Parliament. In later years, top civil servants and PAP leaders began to engage in groupthink, so the distinction between the two became blurred. Today, state-sponsored publications, especially those published after "National Education" was launched on May 17, 1997, heap praise on the courage and determination of that first generation of PAP leaders (National Heritage Board 1998; National Library Board and National Archives of Singapore 2007; National Archives of Singapore 2008; 2010). Civil servants are absent from the nation-building narrative. Even a standard history such as Turnbull's *A History of Modern Singapore* (2009) has the same message. While Seah Chee Meow noted that "the prominent role of the civil service in national devel-

opment has never been doubted,” he also recognized its role as “only grudgingly acknowledged” (Seah 1985, 92). In November 2023, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that “they [civil servants] can only deliver good results because they are led by competent ministers who understand the issues, make good decisions, who command their respect” (Channel NewsAsia 2023).

Civil servants are expected to accept the supremacy of PAP interests and not be politically neutral. This article traces the process of how the civil service gradually lost its neutrality starting with the PAP government’s determination to stamp its authority over the bureaucracy after June 1959. Ironically, by the 1970s, even the PAP criticized civil servants for not exercising initiative and public sensitivity. By then, the civil service had become attuned to the demands of the party it was serving. The period of study ends in 1984 with the retirement of the first generation of PAP leaders as Singapore celebrated 25 years of nation building, leaving Lee and S. Rajaratnam as prime minister and senior minister respectively after that year’s general election.²⁾ This article will show that the long-term impact of PAP rule has been a bureaucracy that ensures the interests of the political masters in the PAP are met. Taming the civil service is part of a larger story of the PAP’s entrenchment of its political dominance in Singapore, but research on the civil service from 1959 to 1984 has been challenging. For senior bureaucrats, part of working life was to meet ministers for instructions on implementing new policies. Conversations during these meetings may not be recorded as the senior bureaucrats would meet the ministers for only a little while. The only sources for such conversations are provided by civil servants through written memoirs or oral history interviews. These sources share a common thread: only positive remarks are made about ministers. My analysis of the role played by the PAP in shaping the civil service is limited because these are the only available sources that reveal what it was like to work with the political masters.

2 Self-aggrandizement of Ministers

When the PAP was elected to form a government in June 1959, it was determined to stamp out problems endemic within the civil service. Lee Kuan Yew, as an opposition member of the Legislative Assembly from 1955 to 1959, had observed how the civil service had been a stumbling block for the government under Chief Ministers David Marshall (1955–56) and Lim Yew Hock (1956–59). While some ministers such as Francis Thomas had no problems with the bureaucrats, others such as Hamid bin Jumat criticized expatriate officers for opposing his schemes to build low-cost houses

(Yeo 1973, 83).

Marshall's response was to convene a Malayanisation Commission, chaired by Dr. B.R. Sreenivasan, to "recommend measures to ensure the more rapid, systematic and complete Malayanization of the Public Service" (Colony of Singapore 1956, 278–279). Expatriate officers in Singapore would be replaced by residents of the former British Malaya.³⁾ Malayanization was a major part of the decolonization process, but, as Yeo Kim Wah noted, by the time the PAP was elected to office in June 1959, "the public service had been entirely Malayanized" except for several technical positions where local people could not be found to replace the expatriate staff (Yeo 1973, 85). In its manifesto at its launch in 1954, the PAP showed little interest in the civil service other than to propose the merger of the Central Government in Singapore and the City Council (Fong 1979, 15). The party argued that while it made sense to have a Central Government before the Second World War that managed the Straits Settlements, the separation of Singapore from the rest of Malaya in 1946 meant that Singapore had two governments: a Central Government focused on Singapore, and a City Council that managed local affairs. The PAP argued that "looking at it from the purely administrative point of view, the . . . functions and activities of the City Council can and should be absorbed by the . . . Ministries of the Central Government" (People's Action Party 1959, 28). In the words of a former PAP member of parliament (MP) two decades later, "a pooling of the professional personnel and resources meant efficient deployment of manpower [*sic*] and made economic sense" (Fong 1979, 80).

The fate of civil servants, especially in the City Council, was not a concern of the party. After the 1959 general election, one of the priorities of the new PAP government was the abolition of the City Council. The forced merger of the Central Government and the City Council was completed without any thought for the well-being of bureaucrats. Malayanization had elevated local officers to replace the expatriates, but the officers now found themselves under threat of a possible dismissal from service. When the Health Department of the City Council merged with the Government Health Department in 1961, rivalries between the health officers from both departments emerged. The amalgamation of the two departments did not occur smoothly since no officer from either City Health or Government Health wanted to play second fiddle in the new Ministry of Health. Dr. S.R. Sayampanathan recalled that the personality conflicts "impeded work really because we took more time dealing with these animosities than with public problems."⁴⁾

The other issue surrounding the colonial civil service in Singapore was the corruption and perceived arrogance of bureaucrats in public service. The Lim Yew Hock government was considered "corrupt from head to toe" (Yap *et al.* 2009, 555). In a

Cold War environment, public disquiet over the civil servants' misconduct was seen as a catalyst for Communist violence. The PAP government used the threat of an imagined Communist takeover of Singapore. In August 1959, two months after the general election, the prime minister told senior civil servants that the bureaucracy should "[keep] in touch with the masses" because "the communists are only too ready to offer the people more drastic alternatives in social revolution" (*Straits Times* 1959a). If the Communists successfully controlled Singapore, the fault lay with the civil service being allegedly out of touch with the "masses." In 1961, the government established a Central Complaints Bureau (CCB) as an avenue for the non-English-educated public to launch complaints against civil servants who were allegedly rude and unfair (Quah 1991, 87). The role of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, established by the British colonial authorities in 1952, in stamping out corruption was strengthened in 1960 through the Prevention of Corruption Act (Quah 1991, 89). This was part of the PAP government's strategy of ensuring that civil servants remained on their best behavior.

Quah has shown how corruption was eventually stamped out, going so far as to say that this was "Lee Kuan Yew's enduring legacy of good governance" (Quah 2013; 2015). Yet, how did civil servants react to being spied upon by CCB officials as they did their work, a result of these public complaints? The oral history interview with Lee Fook Wah, the last director of the CCB, reveals very little, except that there were discreet observations of targeted civil servants doing their jobs.⁵⁾ The authors of *Men in White* (Yap *et al.* 2009)—a reference to PAP members who typically dressed in white during election campaigns—insisted that the setting up of the CCB represented the "manifestation of PAP's determination to stay connected with the masses." Yet the authors also acknowledged that "for hapless civil servants, it was seen as yet another instrument of fear" as anyone who had a complaint against them would be "subjected to investigation" (Yap *et al.* 2009, 178–179). The fate of civil servants spied upon by the CCB officers goes largely unrecorded.

The Lee government also enforced an "attitudinal reform" (Quah 1991, 86; Koh 1997, 117) of the civil service. The PAP first mocked civil servants for having a "colonial mentality" and being "insensitive to the needs of the population at large." Civil servants were accused of being "hostile towards and afraid" of the PAP (Quah 1984, 294). To align the civil service with the objectives of the party, a Political Study Centre was established in August 1959 to train civil servants "to analyse the political, economic and social problems facing a self-governing Singapore" (State of Singapore 1959, 44). The center had to impress upon senior civil servants the Communist threat in Southeast Asia and the socioeconomic problems that the PAP government had to

overcome. Not every civil servant, however, was impressed with the center's objective. Tan Chok Kian remembered several civil servants who thought they were going to be brainwashed, but he merely regarded the center's courses as "an eye-opener" (Low 2018, 40). Ngiam Tong Dow said he would not use the word "brainwash" because "it was changing the mindset of the old Singapore civil servants" (Low 2018, 40).

"Attitudinal reform" of the civil service went to an extreme in October 1959, when Minister for National Development Ong Eng Guan organized Operation Pantai Cantek (Operation Beautiful Beach) to clean up beaches, roads, and vacant lands. Civil servants—labeled "volunteers" from the "English-speaking class" (*Straits Times* 1959c)—were ordered to sacrifice their weekends to perform manual labor. While PAP ministers and legislators were also roped in, making good photographic opportunities to show public service, the event was designed to humiliate bureaucrats into accepting the will of their political masters. When opposition legislator Mohammed Ali bin Alwi raised a question in the Legislative Assembly as to whether these civil servants were truly volunteers, Prime Minister Lee replied, "no one was compelled to volunteer either directly or indirectly" before hounding Mohammed Ali to "prove his allegations" before the Assembly. The legislator meekly replied that "we will co-operate with the Government . . . If we know of any instance, we will bring it to the notice of this Assembly."⁶ Fifty years later, the *Straits Times* reported how "retired civil servants still chafed at the memory," comparing their experience to "the hard labour imposed on professionals in communist countries." The newspaper also quoted P.C. Marcus, former deputy chief administrative officer of the City Council, who said Ong had "put the fear of God in staff" (*Straits Times* 2009). In his autobiography, Lee admitted that "it was a copycat exercise borrowed from the communists" because "we saw no reason why the MCP [Malayan Communist Party] should have the monopoly of such techniques" (Lee 1998, 322). He expressed no remorse about forcing civil servants to sacrifice their weekends to serve the wishes of Ong Eng Guan.

At the same time, and contrary to the Malayanization plans implemented before the PAP was elected to office in 1959, the training of local officers was terminated "unless the Government was satisfied that the training was essential and not merely desirable." The termination of training programs was applied retrospectively. The number of officers proceeding for studies fell from 255 in 1958 to just 41 in 1959 (State of Singapore 1959, 45). Thampoo Panjacharam, who had spent three years studying for an engineering diploma at Singapore Polytechnic, was suddenly informed that the program would be discontinued. His dreams of becoming an engineer were "crushed," leaving him very bitter with the PAP.⁷

What also irked bureaucrats was the sudden announcement of a pay cut. During

its election campaign, the PAP did not mention any pay cuts for civil servants. After it took office, the Lee government reported that the previous administration of Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock (April 1956 to May 1959) had spent \$200 million of the colony's reserves in deficit spending (Tan 2007, 87). Part of the new government's remedy was to reduce the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) from wages. Civil servants were paid a COLA because of the high cost of living in Singapore. It was a monthly allowance that was paid to them on top of their basic salaries. In just three paragraphs, Chua Mui Hoong (2010) recorded that there was a cut of up to 35 percent in the COLA for senior officers earning at least \$505 per month. In June 1960 the government finally acknowledged that the cut in the COLA was a mistake (Vasil 1979, 46), but the allowance was restored only in September 1961 because the government needed the civil service to implement its national programs. PAP MP Fong Sip Chee acknowledged that the pay cut was unpopular but justified it with the statement that the PAP had been "proven right." Fong glorified the pay cut as a "spirit of self-denial" by civil servants without saying how he had come to that conclusion (Fong 1979, 82–83). He did not mention the economic hardship and frustration faced by bureaucrats. In his autobiography, Lee Kuan Yew insisted that "it was a significant but not devastating pay cut" and the government wanted English-educated civil servants to make sacrifices and join everyone else in economic hardship. The annual savings were calculated to be \$12 million (Lee 1998, 318–319).

The official narratives ignore the personal anguish faced by bureaucrats. V.S. Krishnan, a surveyor in 1959, recalled:

Everything was cut. That was in 1959 . . . [I lost quite] a lot. At that time, the allowance was about 400 to 500 dollars and for so many years . . . After two or three years, [it was] reinstated. Many people who had sent their children to UK and overseas had to sell their houses and all sorts of things. They were in great difficulties.⁸⁾

Arthur Fernando also suffered a cut in COLA as a clerk working in the Public Works Department. He recalled his COLA was cut by 20 percent, which worked out to be about \$60, a large sum of money in 1959. The personal and family budgets of civil servants had been worked out, and an unexpected cut in COLA meant that civil servants were suddenly threatened with debt.⁹⁾

Interviews conducted by the Oral History Centre (OHC) with former civil servants reveal the bureaucrats' suspicions that the pay cut was a direct consequence of the PAP's impression that they were anti-PAP. Since its founding in 1954, the PAP had given civil servants the image that it was an ethnic Chinese, radical, and pro-

Communist organization. Due to the use of English as a working language in administration, anyone who wanted to work in the civil service had to be English-educated. This meant that the Chinese-educated could not find employment in the service since they spoke and wrote English poorly. The Chinese-educated formed the backbone of PAP supporters, leading civil servants to believe that the PAP was targeting the English-educated. Thampoo Panjacharam recalled:

They [the PAP] threaten people just to get the support of all the riff-raffs, all the Chinese middle school students, to give the impression that they were anti-British, which means anti-civil servants. Because we were supposed [to be] running dogs of the British.¹⁰⁾

Consequently, it was possible that civil servants did not vote for the PAP during the general election of 1959. It was no wonder then that Fernando believed the cut in COLA was an act of revenge by the PAP “for not voting for them.”¹¹⁾ The administrative reforms of the new government put a tremendous strain on civil servants. The result was a mass exodus from the bureaucracy and the loss of experienced staff. The exodus had a huge impact on the civil service:

The damage this did to the civil service was serious since it deprived the administration, at a time when it could least afford it, of very experienced officers who could not only carry forward the administration but help in the training and guidance of the large batches of new entrants who had to be recruited to fill up vacancies created by expatriate retirements and Malayisation. (Bogaars 1973, 78)

In 1958, one year before the PAP took office, there were 48,000 civil servants. By 1960, the number had fallen to 29,900. It was only when the COLA was restored that the number of civil servants increased again—to 31,400 in 1961 and 33,900 in 1962 (Colony of Singapore 1958, 306; State of Singapore 1960, 38; 1961, 46; 1962, 72). At a time when the government believed it needed to push through socioeconomic changes in Singapore, bureaucrats were leaving the civil service. However, the PAP government’s response to allegations that it was targeting the civil service for punishment was to call them “silly” (*Straits Times* 1959b).

When Singapore was part of Malaysia between 1963 and 1965, the PAP government continued to control the civil service. The management of the bureaucracy was now a state issue. Teo Kah Leong, who was permanent secretary at the Ministry of National Development, recalled that there was “not much of a change in the way that we operated” and that “we carried on as we were before except that we had to liaise

with the Malaysian Government.”¹²⁾ Joseph Desker, then an administrative officer in the Ministry of Finance, recalled that the “Singapore Civil Service was a separate thing from the Malaysian Civil Service.”¹³⁾ S.T. Stewart was appointed head of the civil service in Singapore on October 22, 1963, and it was reported that “all future directives to the service will be issued through him.” He held this appointment until his retirement in June 1965 (*Straits Times* 1963d; 1965). In September 1963, within days of Singapore joining Malaysia, Prime Minister Lee announced that \$3.5 million would be set aside for bonuses to civil servants “in appreciation of the integrity and loyalty which they displayed during the past four years under the PAP Government” while criticizing two opposition parties for promising the restoration of the COLA during the general election campaign a few days earlier. The timing of the bonuses was politically motivated—Lee told reporters that if the PAP had announced the disbursement of the bonuses before or during the election campaign, then civil servants could be “bribed” into voting for the party (*Straits Times* 1963c).

The party also targeted members of the Administrative Service, the highest strata of the civil service. Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis (2008, 238–248) have shown how the selection and formation of this elite group of men and women bore the personal stamp of Lee Kuan Yew. There is clearly a symbiotic relationship between the PAP and the Administrative Service—the former selects members of the latter, and the latter can be the ground for the selection of PAP candidates to stand for election and become Cabinet ministers. While the PAP selects only members of the Administrative Service who are ideologically attuned to the party, it also means that top civil servants, should they have political ambitions, know that they can be neither impartial nor apolitical.

In the introduction of this paper, mention was made of the challenges faced when reading memoirs written by, or listening to oral history interviews with, former civil servants. The narrative is similar: the ministers made no mistakes, their project plans worked out perfectly, and civil servants wholeheartedly believed in the correctness of the ministers as they implemented the project plans efficiently. Interestingly, this attitude of civil servants in their recollections applies to all the first generation of PAP ministers except Ong Eng Guan. Ong has been demonized in both official history and recorded reminiscences because he had fallen out with the PAP leaders and resigned in 1961 to form his own political party.

Ong’s personality and treatment of civil servants were constantly seen in a bad light. Ong had been mayor of Singapore (1957–59), which made him responsible for the administration of the City Council before his appointment as minister for national development. Whether he was in the City Council or the Ministry of National Devel-

opment, he had “the same authoritarian style” (Tan 2007, 92). Fernando recalled that as mayor, Ong was “not too popular” among civil servants because he “kept threatening” that he would dismiss them. A dismissal was the worst thing that could happen to employees of the City Council because it meant that they could lose their superannuation funds. Older bureaucrats who had a sizeable sum of money in their superannuation quickly resigned just to withdraw their funds. When Ong resigned from the PAP, Fernando recalled:

We breathed a sigh of relief. I think Lee Kuan Yew encouraged us, and we got more confidence in the government. Work improved. The morale improved among the staff, I remember. But we were happy to see Ong Eng Guan going. He was more a hindrance than anything else.¹⁴⁾

Ong was also pictured as an unreasonable and unapproachable individual by former civil servants interviewed by the OHC. M. Bala Subramanion, who worked in the Postal Services Department from 1936 until his retirement in 1971, recalled meeting Ong for the first time in 1959. Ong had summoned all the heads of government departments to his ministry and told them that he found it unacceptable to see queues at public counters. Subramanion told the minister that during lunch hours and toward office closing time, queues at the post office were unavoidable and that this was “a feature common even in the post offices in other parts of the world.” Ong was visibly annoyed with Subramanion for questioning his demands and “curtly remarked that the counter clerk should work diligently as their work was so simple like the ticket-issuing assistants at cinemas.” Ong had the impression that the work of counter staff at a post office was no different from the work of those working at a cinema ticket booth. The permanent secretary motioned to Subramanion not to speak further, leading him to conclude the “valuable lesson” that “discretion is a better part of valor in any discussion with a politician in public.”¹⁵⁾

In contrast to Ong, another minister in the first Cabinet who was also known for his bad temper and impatience was portrayed positively in the recollections of civil servants. Standard histories mention favorably the role Dr. Goh Keng Swee played in the economic development of Singapore. Dr. Goh was a forceful individual in the Cabinet who held the portfolios of Finance, Defence, and Education in a long ministerial career from 1959 to 1984. A retired principal recalled that “anyone who is . . . in any position should realise this point that this is not a man to play a fool with.”¹⁶⁾ Robert Belhetchet, a Catholic priest appointed by Dr. Goh to join a committee to produce a secular moral education curriculum for schools in 1979, felt that the minister was “a no-nonsense man who didn’t have time to waste.”¹⁷⁾

Individuals interviewed by the OHC revealed Dr. Goh to be a man in a hurry to achieve his goals. He was very decisive in what he wanted, and he demanded civil servants successfully complete the work assigned to them. Bernard Chen, then working at the Economic Development Board (EDB), said “he never rest[ed],” “he always have [*sic*] ideas,” and “he is a creator of many things.” To the question about whether Dr. Goh asked civil servants for feedback on these “many things,” Chen replied, “He had decided already, he said, ‘you do this, you do that.’ So, you put the flesh into the bones. He had already given you the skeleton.” Chen also recalled that the minister was up-front about his impression of civil servants: “if he thinks you are no good, he would [*sic*] blast you,” and “if he hauls you up, you are in trouble.”¹⁸⁾ Lim Siong Guan, a former permanent secretary, recalled that for many civil servants, meeting Dr. Goh was “a very terrifying thing because it is all like an interrogation.” Lim surmised that from the minister’s perspective, “if you are the guy in charge and you don’t know what is going on, how is he going to trust you to get the job done?”¹⁹⁾ Winston Choo, Singapore’s first lieutenant general, recalled that it took him four minutes to walk from his office to Dr. Goh’s office in the Ministry of Defence, and “it is like walking the stations of the cross when he calls you.” Yet, Choo also noted that “he [Dr. Goh] likes people to criticise him or disagree with him”—it was just that the minister did not like it to be publicly known that he had been wrong.²⁰⁾

Dr. Goh’s determination to get things done gave civil servants the impression that he was impatient. His impatience also meant that he bent the rules in his favor, typically by ignoring established practices and the chain of command within the civil service. Tan Chin Tiong, then a young military officer, recalled that “when he [Dr. Goh] has an idea he will bypass the whole system” and that “he was not dogmatic about rules.”²¹⁾ Dr. Goh was known to go “straight to the source of any issue that caught his attention” (Chan 2019, 196). Among the military elite in Singapore, it was known that “no matter how objectively Dr Goh approached personnel issues, they were still personal and subjective” (Chan 2019, 197). Dr. Goh’s method of handling civil servants meant that discussion of any policy with him was useless if he had made up his mind. Bureaucrats were motivated not by the importance of the nation-building agenda but by an anxiety that they had failed him. It did not matter how bureaucrats worked on the projects so long as they delivered what Dr. Goh had demanded.

The pressure faced by civil servants working with Dr. Goh is evident from the recollections of Chan Chin Bock and his ex-colleagues in their book *Heart Work* (Chan *et al.* 2002). In 1961, the EDB was established to attract foreign investment to Singapore; foreign investors would open factories and hire Singaporean workers in a bid to cut down unemployment. Suppiah Dhanabalan was ordered to draft a paper for

the approval of the Cabinet for the establishment of the Economic Development Board, a name coined by Dr. Goh. When Dr. Goh made heavy amendments to the memorandum, Dhanabalan knew that the government had already made industrialization the key cornerstone of Singapore's economic development and that "there was no need to explain this any further" in the paper (Chan *et al.* 2002, 23–24). Dhanabalan's role was not to advise Dr. Goh as a politically neutral civil servant should; his role was to produce a report to confirm the minister's plans.

Dr. Goh also gave Chan Chin Bock the arduous task of organizing the opening ceremonies of new factories every day for three months. In her biography of Dr. Goh, Tan Siok Sun wrote:

To his credit, Chan obediently nodded his head as he left the Minister's room, only to return to his desk wondering in desperation how he was to arrange 90 such ceremonies when there were not even nine factories up and running at that point in time. (Tan 2007, 95)

Chan eventually organized three different ceremonies for each factory: the laying of the foundation stone, the commencement of building works, and the start of factory production. Dr. Goh got what he wanted, but it was clear that both Dhanabalan and Chan were not expected to say "no" to his demands. The careers of both men were safe. Chan would be chairman of the EDB from 1972 to 1974, while Dhanabalan joined the PAP and was elected to Parliament in 1976. It was clear that, to use the words of a retired colonel, "The thing about Goh Keng Swee, when he likes you, he likes you. That's the trouble" (Chan 2019, 197).

3 Politicizing the Civil Service

When the PAP won the 1959 general election, its leaders, including Secretary-General Lee, who became prime minister, had never been ministers. Only Ong Eng Guan had public service experience, since he had been the mayor of Singapore. Dr. Goh Keng Swee, the deputy prime minister, and Law Minister K.M. Byrne were former civil servants who had resigned to contest the election as PAP candidates. The PAP consisted of democratic socialists and radical leftists, and consequently the party's political opponents, the press, and the civil service regarded the party (especially its radical members) with suspicion. After 1959, the party moved against its opponents. Lee recalled how he told Leslie Hoffman, the editor of the *Straits Times* who had consistently criticized the PAP:

Look, I'm putting my life at stake, if I lose and the Communists win, I'm in real trouble. You are sitting on the sidelines tapping away on your typewriter, what gives you this God-given right? Who gave you this right? I am seeking this right and when I get it, I'm going to tell you how you should not run your paper. (*Straits Times* 1995)

Hoffman took the message seriously and left for Kuala Lumpur the day after Lee was sworn in as prime minister on June 3, 1959. On July 29, 1961, the radical faction of the PAP broke ranks and formed the Barisan Sosialis. Operation Coldstore was launched on February 2, 1963, and led to the arrests of 111 people, including prominent leaders of the Barisan Sosialis, as Lee claimed that "massive agitation was about to be mounted by the Red conspirators in conjunction with Indonesia's growing belligerence against Malaysia" (*Straits Times* 1963b). Ong Eng Guan, now an opposition member of the Legislative Assembly, told reporters that "Government's action becomes more suspect when it is widely believed that the . . . general elections would not be far off" (*Straits Times* 1963a). Singapore joined Malaysia on September 16, and the PAP won the general election held in Singapore on September 21.

The crackdown on the political opposition and the press could not be reproduced against the civil service as the Lee government needed the bureaucracy to implement its policies. Instead, the Lee government made it crystal clear that it wanted total control of public administration. It came to a point where civil servants were also expected to read the minds of ministers and anticipate what they wanted, even if the ministers did not make their demands explicit. For example, to underline the message that civil servants were expected to be courteous to the public, a courtesy campaign was implemented in 1961. The entire exercise stemmed from a lecture delivered by Dr. Goh Keng Swee at the Political Study Centre on December 16, 1960. Pointing to the term "civil service," Dr. Goh said that "the word civil originally was used to distinguish the civil from the military establishments, but for our purpose civil must mean courteous and considerate." Dr. Goh mentioned that "courtesy is not an additional gimmick of ephemeral or minor importance" because "it is an essential attribute of the civil servant."²² Three months later, the director for training sent an 18-page draft report to the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Culture about the courtesy levels in the ministry.²³ A courtesy campaign (at least in the Ministry of Culture) took off. In August 1961, all the heads of division were ordered by the permanent secretary "to impress upon the staff of the importance of being courteous" when serving the public and "to put into force whatever measures found necessary for the success of this drive."²⁴ Each division in the ministry had to appoint a courtesy or public relations officer to ensure that "proper courtesy is shown to the

public.”²⁵) In his speech Dr. Goh did not mention the need to appoint such “courtesy officers,” but in a system where civil servants were increasingly expected to fall in line with the wishes of the political leaders, the Ministry of Culture went into overdrive to impress upon Dr. Goh that action had been taken against discourteous bureaucrats.

There was also a lack of ministerial responsibility since the PAP did not see ministers to be at fault should anything go wrong. Unlike Western democracies where government failures would be questioned in the legislature and ministers called to account, it was the civil service that faced censure by the PAP in post-1959 Singapore. One example was the debate on the annual budget statement in Parliament on December 23, 1965, when PAP MP Sim Boon Woo said:

The whole nation has expressed its confidence in entrusting its future to the hands of the People's Action Party Government. And I am sure, if *nothing goes wrong with the behaviour of the civil servants* in serving the people efficiently and cordially, then the bringing about of a more just and equal multi-racial society will be realised sooner than we expected.²⁶)

The problem was compounded by a weak political opposition after independence from Malaysia in 1965. The main opposition party, the Barisan Sosialis, organized a boycott of parliamentary elections and resigned en masse in 1966. There was criticism from J.B. Jeyaratnam, secretary-general of the Workers' Party, during the 1972 general election campaign when he accused the PAP of “suppressing” the civil service because “the PAP's actions to further the party's interests had driven away civil servants from the service” (*Straits Times* 1972b). The PAP won all the parliamentary seats in the 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 general elections, before Jeyaratnam won a seat in a by-election in 1981. The lack of political opposition meant that government decisions were not scrutinized effectively in Parliament. As former PAP MP Dr. Lau Teik Soon recalled, “most of the proposals in the draft bills . . . had already been decided on when they come to Parliament for parliamentary debate.” He also believed that ministers “would not want to be seen to be weak and bend to the comments and suggestions to amend their draft bills.”²⁷)

With a one-party Parliament from 1966 to 1981, the civil service increasingly served the party's interests even as ministers claimed that the bureaucracy worked for the nation and not the PAP. Civil servants had to view Singapore and their work through the lenses of the PAP. In 1972 Prime Minister Lee, in describing the “perfect civil servant,” urged civil servants to be “politically alert, have an understanding of both internal and external security problems, and integrity, and education”(*Straits*

Times 1972a). However, civil servants could only understand security problems based on information released by ministers. By 1980 the new minister for defense, Howe Yoon Chong (himself a retired civil servant), pointed out that a “new generation of political leaders may increasingly be trained from within the civil service.” Younger Singaporeans, who did not go through economic hardship in the 1950s and 1960s, were accused of becoming self-centered, detached from society, and individualistic. Howe called them “selfish, uncaring, ugly ‘economic animals’” and suggested young civil servants develop a sense of social consciousness by working in grassroots organizations (*Straits Times* 1980). These organizations were part of the network of committees across the city-state that were managed by the People’s Association (PA), a statutory board organized by an Act of the Legislative Assembly in 1961. The PA was chaired by the prime minister. Opposition parties were not allowed to participate in grassroots organizations.²⁸⁾

In the 1970s PAP leaders began painting an image of the civil service as lacking in professionalism and new skills. Dr. Augustine Tan, a PAP MP, called for greater professionalism in the civil service since “we cannot solve tomorrow’s problems with yesterday’s expertise.” His suggestion was that the bureaucracy attract more holders of master’s and doctoral degrees in order to prevent an “expertise gap” and a “brain gap” (*Straits Times* 1970). Furthermore, with an exodus of civil servants, the official explanation from George Bogaars, head of the civil service, was that “civil servants after a time become dissatisfied when they find themselves out-stripped, salary-wise, by their contemporaries in the private sector.” The solution, therefore, was to raise civil servants’ salaries (*Straits Times* 1972c). While civil servants could have left the bureaucracy due to lower salaries, there was no mention of other possible reasons. The impression was that those who left the civil service did so only for monetary reasons. A possible reason for the supposed lack of professionalism and the unattractiveness of the civil service was that there was no motivation to exercise any initiative or to speak one’s mind—the job was to complete the task given by senior civil servants, who in turn did what the ministers wanted them to do.

By the 1980s, the idea of a politically neutral civil service had been completely eradicated. In 1982, Second Deputy Prime Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam confidently claimed that a politically neutral civil service was a “myth inherited from British colonial times” and added:

The theory that our Civil Service is above politics is for simple-minded civil servants. A more realistic image should be founded on the fact that our bureaucracy has always been political and must continue to be served by political considerations and objectives. (*Straits Times* 1982a)

These “political considerations and objectives” referred to the agenda of the PAP, including the way in which the recent past should be remembered. Civil servants were sent to the Civil Service Institute to attend courses managed by academics from the Department of Political Science of the National University of Singapore on the “historical perspective” of the labor movement in Singapore. No alternative views of the history of the labor movement were accepted, and events of the past continued to shape the labor movement in the early 1980s. This “perspective” remains part of the PAP narrative today that trade unions which did not side with the party were militant (or pro-Communist) and were eventually defeated politically by the party. Such a perspective was meant to make young bureaucrats “more sensitive in their policy decisions by taking into account public sentiments and values” (*Singapore Monitor* 1983b). It also created an image of bureaucrats who were aloof about public needs until they received training that made them aware their work was to serve the interests of the PAP.

The partiality of the civil service became clear after Jeyaretnam was elected to Parliament in 1981. Two days after his electoral victory in Anson, he told reporters that he planned to write to the Housing and Development Board (HDB) for premises to set up an office in the constituency, and to investigate the activities of grassroots organizations in Anson (*New Nation* 1981). Within two weeks, Jeyaretnam accused the PAP government of “obstructing him from discharging his responsibilities to his constituents” (*Straits Times* 1981). He was denied the use of the office previously used by the PAP MP because it had been leased to the MP and not to the party. The chief executive officer of the HDB, Liu Thai Ker, reportedly told Jeyaretnam that “he was awaiting a directive” from the Ministry of National Development about the termination of the lease of that office space. In 1983, PAP members (including the candidate who had lost to Jeyaretnam in the 1981 by-election) and civil servants attended a charity dinner that raised \$120,000 for the Anson Community Centre Fund Raising Committee (*Singapore Monitor* 1983a). Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Lee Kuan Yew, was nominated as a PAP candidate for the 1984 general election after a team of civil servants from the HDB had spent “many months” preparing the groundwork for his candidature. Zulkifli Baharudin, then an officer in the HDB, had to communicate with residents and “[made] sure everyone was happy.” Zulkifli himself turned down an opportunity to be a PAP candidate (Barr and Skrbis 2008, 79).²⁹ Clearly, civil servants could be tasked to work for the PAP.

The civil service could not have been impartial if it was acceptable for civil servants to attend functions for, and work for the interests of, the PAP against an elected representative from the political opposition. Today the PA is still chaired by the prime

minister. Grassroots organizations in opposition-held wards remain managed by the defeated PAP candidates. The common interests of the PAP and senior bureaucrats of the Administrative Service can be seen in how some among the latter joined the party and entered politics. In addition to Dhanabalan, other senior civil servants who took the same route included Chen (of the EDB, who became a minister of state), Teh Cheang Wan (of the HDB, who was minister of national development from 1979 to 1986), and Howe (head of the civil service, who retired in 1979 before his election to Parliament in a by-election and was a Cabinet minister until his retirement from politics in 1984). Although these civil servants had resigned or retired from the bureaucracy to contest the elections on a PAP ticket, no civil servant left their job to contest the elections as a candidate for any opposition party. The civil service had indeed become the training ground for new leaders of the PAP.

4 Conclusion

Full internal self-government in June 1959 marked a turning point in Singapore's history as local political leaders took full control over the internal administration of the island. For the colonized, especially the Chinese-educated, the civil service until 1959 pandered to the interests of the colonial masters. Corruption and bad behavior by civil servants were major problems for the new Lee Kuan Yew government. In dealing with these issues, the Lee government did change public perception of the civil service from a corrupt and arrogant institution serving colonial interests to one that was working with the government to tackle new problems that arose from decolonization. While civil servants were not allowed to accept bribes and had to be polite to the public, they were also expected to perform their tasks quietly and not question (at least in public) the wisdom of ministers.

The image of Singapore as a country under "good governance" ignores a fundamental aspect of Singapore's modern history: the subjugation of the civil service to the will of the ruling party. From 1959, civil servants left the service due to pay cuts, the possible lack of opportunities to further their training and education, and the search for a better working life. The exodus meant that PAP government initiatives and programs could be delayed or derailed. The solution was to hire new personnel who had no connection with the previous colonial administration and then mold them into bureaucrats to service the party. As the writers of *Men in White* noted, "if there was a talent vacuum, it had to be filled, and this led to the rise of high-caliber civil servants whom PAP ministers were to rely on and work with hand-in-glove to begin

the Singapore Story.” These individuals, we know today, included the prominent senior bureaucrats Howe and Bogaars (Yap *et al.* 2009, 174). The PAP’s entire agenda for Singapore in 1959—whether it was industrialization, housing, or eradicating Communism—could not have been achieved without a compliant civil service. Bureaucrats could not question the wisdom of ministers, as M. Bala Subramanion, S. Dhanabalan, and Chan Chin Bock realized when dealing with Ministers Ong Eng Guan and Dr. Goh Keng Swee. The fear of upsetting ministers mixed with a recognition of the *fait accompli* of “one party dominance” (Chan 1976) in Singapore kept civil servants in line.

With the PAP in power since 1959, civil servants are not expected to work impartially in the interests of the party. The practice in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia is that the new party organizing the government trusts the civil service to be impartial. In turn, the civil service helps the government by giving advice before developing and implementing policies as effectively as possible. In Singapore, after 66 years of continuous PAP rule, it is the party that plans policies to be implemented by docile bureaucrats. The civil service has become an extension of the party. In a letter to the *Straits Times* in 1982, Jeyaretnam, the MP for Anson, accused the PAP of using the civil service to further its agenda. He wrote, “the PAP ever since it came to power and even before that has tried to make the civil service identify itself with the party” (*Straits Times* 1982b).

The partiality of the civil service does raise questions of governance. Michael Barr (2020, 54) wondered whether Singapore was an ideal example to the developing world of the success of its authoritarian policies or the effectiveness of governance. I argue that the former is more accurate as the civil service remains subservient to the interests of the PAP. In other countries, especially in liberal democracies which have seen peaceful transfers of power from one ruling party or coalition to another, the civil service is expected to be politically neutral because officials must show a degree of commitment and professional standards in their work even if they have differences of opinion with their political masters. Political neutrality means that civil servants continue to serve the public even after a change in government. However, there has been no change in government in Singapore as the PAP has ruled continuously since 1959. Between 1968 and 1981, Singapore also had a one-party parliament.

What has been passed off as “good” or efficient civil servants is a result of the cultivation of a subservient groupthink mentality in the bureaucracy. Civil servants must respond to challenges faced by the nation but within the PAP’s limited and self-serving worldview. Not surprisingly, as Barr (2020, 57) also pointed out, Singapore is training civil servants from countries with authoritarian regimes such as China,

Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Stephan Ortmann and Mark Thompson noted especially China's obsession with Singapore because the latter was "the only country in the region to achieve advanced economic industrialization without undergoing substantial political liberalization" (Ortmann and Thompson 2016, 39–40). Civil servants in these countries must unquestioningly serve the interests of the ruling parties.

Quah (2008, 18) argued that Singapore had achieved "good governance" because the state had emphasized accountability and successfully implemented administrative reforms. This article argues that what the PAP achieved was not so much good governance as total political control in Singapore. The party could implement its agenda, including "attitudinal reforms" and policies on industrialization, because it had subjugated the civil service to serve its interests. In the long run, however, questions will be asked about what would happen to the civil service should the PAP be voted out of office. This topic is no longer a far-fetched one as the party, while still politically dominant in Singapore, has seen a decline in its share of the vote since the 1980 general election. In November 2022, a Channel NewsAsia podcast discussed the consequences for Singapore should the party lose power (Channel NewsAsia 2022). How would the civil service respond, as its interests and agenda had become so intertwined with those of the PAP? Could the Singapore civil service truly become politically neutral?

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Notes

- 1) "Civil service" is the term used in Singapore, but the term "public service" is used in other countries such as Canada and Australia. Both refer to people hired by the national (federal) and state governments.
- 2) Lee stepped down as prime minister in 1990 but remained in the Cabinet until 2011. Rajaratnam retired from politics just before the 1988 general election.
- 3) "British Malaya" before the Second World War consisted of three entities: the Federated Malay States, Unfederated Malay States, and Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore). The Malayan Union was introduced in 1946 and replaced by the Federation of Malaya in 1948. Singapore was separated from the rest of Malaya in 1946 and governed as a Crown Colony.
- 4) National Archives of Singapore (NAS), oral history interview, Sathiamoorthy Ramalingam Sayampanathan, accession no. A002142/08, reel/disc 4, August 5, 1999.
- 5) NAS, oral history interview, Lee Fook Wah, accession number B002373/09, reel/disc 3, September 1, 2000.

- 6) Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly, Session No. 1, Vol. 11, Sitting No. 12, November 11, 1959, cols 723–724.
- 7) NAS, oral history interview, Thampoo Panjacharam, accession no. A001472/06, reel/disc 4, December 10, 2001.
- 8) NAS, oral history interview, V.S. Krishnan, accession no. A002424/08, reel/disc 5, November 7, 2000.
- 9) NAS, oral history interview, Arthur Cyril Fernando, accession no. A002328/12, reel 10, March 26, 2002.
- 10) NAS, oral history interview, Thampoo Panjacharam, accession no. A001472/06, reel 5, December 10, 2001.
- 11) NAS, oral history interview, Arthur Cyril Fernando, accession no. A002328/12, reel 10, March 26, 2002.
- 12) NAS, oral history interview, Teo Kah Leong, accession no. A001431/06, reel/disc 5, December 3, 1993.
- 13) NAS, oral history interview, Joseph Anthony Desker, accession no. A001433/08, reel/disc 4, September 16, 1993.
- 14) NAS, oral history interview, Arthur Cyril Fernando, accession no. A002328/12, reel/disc 10, March 26, 2002.
- 15) NAS, oral history interview, M. Bala Subramanion, accession no. A003202/CF10, reel/disc 7, October 10, 2008.
- 16) NAS, oral history interview, Sim Hock Hye, accession no. A002177/15, reel/disc 8, November 11, 1999.
- 17) NAS, oral history interview, Rev. Fr. (Dr) Robert Belhetchet, accession no. A002606/21, reel/disc 14, August 21, 2007.
- 18) NAS, oral history interview, Bernard Chen Tien Lap, accession no. A002530/16, reel/disc 15, October 5, 2010.
- 19) NAS, oral history interview, Lim Siong Guan, accession no. A001909/1, reel/disc 1, June 25, 2009.
- 20) NAS, oral history interview, Lt.-Gen. (Ret.) Winston Choo Wee Leong, accession no. A003026/02, reel/disc 1, July 31, 2009.
- 21) NAS, oral history interview, Tan Chin Tiong, accession no. A004234/07, reel/disc 1, January 19, 2018.
- 22) NAS, microfilm AR8, Ministry of Culture, file MC146/59 Part 1, circular to all permanent secretaries from Director of Training, December 21, 1960.
- 23) NAS, microfilm AR8, Ministry of Culture, file MC146/59 Part 1, letter from Director of Training to Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, March 16, 1961.
- 24) NAS, microfilm AR8, Ministry of Culture, file MC146/59, “Courtesy Drive—Ministry of Culture,” August 15, 1961.
- 25) NAS, microfilm AR8, Ministry of Culture, file MC146/59, circular from permanent secretary to all heads of division, August 30, 1961.
- 26) Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Parliament No. 1, Session No. 1, Vol. 24, Sitting No. 10, December 23, 1965, cols 518–519, emphasis added.
- 27) NAS, oral history interview, Lau Teik Soon, accession number A001871/30, reel/disc 25, May 14, 1997.
- 28) Since Jeyaratnam won a by-election in 1981, it would be the PAP candidates who had lost in the polls who could head the grassroots organizations in the constituencies. This has been a frequent criticism of the grassroots organizations by the opposition until today.
- 29) Zulkifli later served as a nominated member of parliament, from 1997 to 2001.

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