

Barr M. (2014). *The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence*. London: I.B. Tauris. £ 52.50 (hbk) ISBN 978 1 78076 234 0

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Like few other countries, the rise of Singapore from a British Crown Colony to a global financial centre over the past few decades is linked to a single individual in the public imagination: Lee Kuan Yew. His death in March 2015 and Singapore's 50th year anniversary in August of the same year renewed discussions about the future trajectory of Singaporean politics. Michael Barr's most recent book on the ruling elite of the city-state therefore ought to have all the potential to make for a timely contribution to this debate.

In his book, Barr examines mechanisms of elite reproduction in Singapore. He argues that after Lee Kuan Yew as a student at Cambridge University had read Arnold Toynbee's (1946) *A Study of History*, which argued that countries collapsed throughout history after elites failed to adapt to changing circumstances, he placed a premium on establishing mechanisms that would allow him to mould the city-state's political and economic elite according to his own interests. Through a combination of educational and social engineering, a network of power and influence emerged that has controlled Singapore for the past few decades and is, according to Barr, likely to do so in the future.

Five key characteristics define Singapore's elite: One, the country's relatively small size and population facilitated the emergence of a tight-knit network. Two, the initial core elite consisted almost exclusively of Anglophones with only remote connections with their constituencies. These English-educated nationals saw themselves as 'benefactors of less-educated fellow nationals' (p. 14), an attitude which continues among elites today, according to Michael Barr. Three, elite relations were and continue to be shaped by the patronage of LKY and his family. Four, being Chinese remains central for elite recruitment. Five, a military career continues to be important for people who want to break into the country's highest political circles. In sum, Singapore's elite network is highly personalized, and contingent on access to the Lee family, as well as friendships formed in the armed forces. Patronage distributed to loyal servants of the Lee family provides the glue that holds this network together (p. 80).

After this brief appraisal of Singapore's elite network, Barr then sets out to examine the aforementioned core characteristics of Singapore's power networks in a chronological fashion. Chapter 2 examines how the origins of today's elite are rooted in the formative years after independence and how the network of politicians has only marginally expanded in the past 50 years. Barr estimates that no more than 300 new figures have been added to Singapore's innermost circle since 1965. Helped by Singapore's small size, this elite embedded itself very quickly, while marginalizing the parliament and the judiciary as sites for the contestation of power, according to Chapter 3. The following chapter shows how Singapore's elite network began to show signs of maturity in the 1980s. Not only did Lee Kuan Yew consolidate his dominance through the use of a newly professionalized bureaucracy, but the decade also saw the rise of second generation technocrats who applied a softer approach to ruling over Singapore within the framework provided by Lee. Chapter 5 then shows how Lee Kuan Yew consolidated his rule by elevating 'Chineseness' to a central role in the country's identity, as well as pushing an elitist educational and military system, from which new candidates to Singapore's elite could be recruited. Chapter 6 examines the rise of Lee Kuan Yew's son Lee Hsien Loong and how he slowly wrestled power from his father,

culminating in the departure of Lee Kuan Yew from politics in 2011. Chapter 7 provides a 'power map' of Singapore's elite at the time of writing in 2011 while the final chapter speculates about the future of the country without Lee Kuan Yew. The author concludes that Lee Kuan Yew's rule is likely to endure for the foreseeable future. The PAP continues to dominate the parliament and institutional engineering makes it difficult for opposition parties to win a majority of seats. In addition, Lee Kuan Yew allies and appointees continue to dominate the state apparatus, where power remains concentrated. Consequently, even in the unlikely event that Singapore's main opposition party, the Worker's Party, would win a majority in elections, the broad contours of Singaporean politics which Lee Kuan Yew created are likely to remain.

The book under review here makes several important contributions. For instance, concrete mechanisms and dynamics of elite reproduction are rarely explicitly addressed in scholarship on South East Asian politics. Barr's study contains a great number of details about the career paths of the individuals who have shaped Singapore. The book also provides a glimpse into the dark side of Singapore's development miracle over the past decades. Despite tremendous economic growth that lifted many Singaporeans out of poverty, the country's public sphere remains confined and opposition is ruthlessly suppressed. Corruption, influence-peddling, rent-seeking and government incompetence continue to be ignored the higher up one moves in Singapore's political hierarchy.

Such contributions make Michael Barr's study a timely reminder that, despite all the self-congratulatory speeches about economic progress and institutional consolidation during the independence ceremony on 9 August 2015, the country continues to rest on an informal system of personal relations that is not accountable to the overwhelming majority of Singaporean citizens. 'A refusal to admit the potential for abuse at the most senior levels means that an awful lot rests on an informal system of elite socialization that is not even publicly articulated', Hamilton-Hart is quoted as stating on p. 127.

However, there is very little information in Barr's book that is not already known from previous research conducted by other scholars. For instance, Lee Kuan Yew's rise to power has been well documented for some time, as have the few elite battles that became publicly visible over the past decades. Furthermore, the book is largely descriptive and no theory of elite reproduction is put forward. This is unfortunate as there would have been many interesting avenues for developing an analytical framework. For instance, Barr mentions the ubiquitous presence of the state in the economy (p. 59) but does not use such findings to provide a broader theoretical argument. Barrington Moore's theory of how the relationship of the middle class vis-à-vis the state shapes the propensity of a country to democratize could, for example, have been a starting point to a more rigorous analysis of what conditions shape elite networks in Singapore and how these elite networks define politics. The book's focus on individuals and the relations between them also confines the author's predictions for a post-Lee Kuan Yew Singapore. The chapter which deals with the question of whether the power basis on which Singapore's government rests has become institutionalized enough to survive the demise of Lee Kuan Yew is a mere 10 pages long. Barr only says that the way Lee Hsien Loong handled the crisis in 2011, induced by the biggest electoral victory for the opposition since the independence of Singapore, should allow him to 'face the future with reasonable basis for confidence' (p. 131). However, what about the challenges arising from Singapore's ageing population and the potential tensions triggered by the rapid influx of foreigners that is encouraged by the government to secure the replacement rate of 'Singaporeans' in light of changing demographics? Likewise, how will the fact that the country's economic well-being increasingly depends on global economic developments shape the future of Singapore's elite? What if they can no longer point to economic progress to legitimate their rule? The book's

emphasis on the role of individuals and their capacity to remain in power comes at the cost of neglecting such broader, structural factors and how they will shape the political future of Singapore. While such 'figure watching' (the book grew out of a briefing paper, the author says) has its merits to gain a quick understanding of how power relations between individuals shape Singaporean politics, it says little about the future trajectory of the city-state. In other words, the book provides a useful synopsis of existing scholarship but very little original research and the insights that can be gained as a result remain relatively limited.

**Reference**

Toynbee A (1946) *A Study of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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