

2017

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APA Citation

George, C. (2017). Calibrated coercion. *Singapore, incomplete: Reflections on a first world nation's arrested political development*, 115-122. Retrieved from https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/hkbu_staff_publication/7046

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Calibrated coercion

The state has grown in power by moderating its use of force.

One of the lesser-known tributes paid to Lee Kuan Yew on his passing in 2015 was a sculpture by a scale-model hobbyist nicknamed Waylander. It depicts Lee encased in formidable red and white armour inspired by the Hulkbuster suit worn by Marvel Comics' Iron Man. "Who else is the Iron Man of Singapore than LKY rite?" the artist says on his blog. "The power, his steel resolve, his iron fist.... I thought it was a fitting suit for the Old Man lol."

On his sculpture's base, Waylander embedded a 1997 quote by Lee: "Anybody who decides to take me on needs to put on knuckledusters. If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you... try."

For readers more familiar with Iron Man's repulsor beams and rocket launchers than Lee's knuckledusters, I should explain that the latter are archaic brass weapons worn over the knuckles to add bone-crushing power to one's punches. You will find knuckledusters explicitly mentioned in Singapore law: they are classified as offensive weapons and banned in public places. That never stopped Lee from referring to them with relish now and then, to remind

audiences of his streetfighter reputation. There was never really any danger, though, that people would forget what Lee was capable of. In the early decades of his leadership, perhaps, people may have underestimated how tough he could be when dealing with his opponents. When he got tangled in disputes that seemed within the bounds of normal democratic contestation, he would strike out with bans, deportations and detentions without trial. He came to be associated with no-holds-barred treatment of his opponents.

Indeed, so dominant was his knuckleduster reputation that it is easy to overlook a key skill that Lee applied in his use of force. He was a master at calibrating his coercive interventions. Instead of blasting his way through every obstacle, he often exercised tactical self-restraint, picking more delicate and precise instruments to bring opponents under his control.

Lee's calibrated coercion contributed to the People's Action Party's longevity. Many authoritarian regimes have been toppled after overdoing the use of force. Excessive violence tends to backfire. Instead of solidifying obedience, it generates moral outrage that can spawn rebellion. The Arab Spring of 2010–11 took off in Tunisia when petty officials abused a vegetable seller to breaking point. In Southeast Asia, the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr in 1983 galvanised the opposition to Ferdinand Marcos and set off the Philippines' People Power Revolution. When troops killed four university students in Jakarta in 1998, it marked a tipping point in favour of the Reformasi movement against the Suharto regime.

Not surprisingly, Lee's memoirs do not describe his philosophy of violence. But you can infer it from conversations he had with other authoritarian leaders. He shared with Li Peng, former premier of China, his misgivings about the Tiananmen crackdown, pointing out that the Chinese had staged a "grand show" for the television cameras. He contrasted it with the tactics he'd used to break up sit-ins by leftist students. "I cordoned off the whole area around the schools, shut off the water and electricity, and just waited," he said. "I told their parents that health conditions were deteriorating,

dysentery was going to spread. And they broke it up without any difficulty.” Lee had a similar opinion of Malaysia’s stunning detention of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. Photos of special forces storming his home, and Anwar later emerging from custody with a black eye only energised the Reformasi movement. Meeting Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad a few months later, Lee said the government should have used “a straightforward criminal charge” instead of the Internal Security Act (ISA).

In both cases, Lee was not questioning his fellow premiers’ compulsion to neutralise challengers—only the methods they’d chosen. Tanks and men with guns make for bad optics. Lee recommended a more calibrated response.



The most extreme weapon in the Singapore government’s arsenal was, and remains, the ISA. Lee was not above using this to arrest political dissidents without warrant and detain them without trial, some for periods normally reserved for individuals convicted of violent crimes. Throughout his period as prime minister, there was invariably somebody in prison who had never had the chance to defend himself in court. Former detainees have alleged mistreatment in the forms of sleep deprivation, interrogation in icy cold rooms and psychological pressure.

The ISA could be brutally effective. But Lee clearly didn’t want to over-rely on this ultimate weapon. There was method to the badness. The ISA and other extreme measures were periodically used like a kill switch or reboot button to stop an emerging problem in its tracks. Lee would then install custom-made constraints to prevent a recurrence of the problem. The new legislation would allow the government to shape the revival of that particular sector, such that it would never recreate a situation that would require the blunderbuss ISA to be used again. Finally, the government would attempt to co-opt and reward those who were prepared to cooperate

with it, thus isolating potential challengers. One by one, different parts of Singapore society were given this reboot-repair-rehabilitate treatment.

The first sector to be dealt with in this way was organised labour. Militant unions had been a powerful political force before independence. Labour activists were prime targets for preventive detention. But the PAP didn't stop there. It followed up by restructuring labour relations. In the 1960s, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) was created. It was built up into a key axis in a tripartite system of government-business-labour negotiations. Some labour leaders were inducted into the PAP as MPs, while PAP backbenchers and cabinet-level politicians were inserted in NTUC leadership positions. Through such steps, it became practically inconceivable that any labour union would act in a fashion requiring the use of the ISA.

Student activism was another source of trouble that the PAP neutralised within the first two decades of independence. More than 250 students were detained or expelled; many were banished from Singapore. For example, more than ten Nanyang University students were rounded up in 1963's Operation Coldstore. This only riled up the student body, encouraging ten Nantah alumni to stand for election under the Barisan Sosialis banner. The acrimonious cycle of student protest and arrest continued. In 1968, to fix the problem from within, Lee handed the University of Singapore vice-chancellorship to senior cabinet colleague Toh Chin Chye. He swiftly imposed discipline, but there was still the occasional disruption. Even law lecturer Tommy Koh led a rally.

In 1974–75, the University of Singapore Students' Union took up social causes under presidents Juliet Chin and Tan Wah Piow. Tan was sentenced to a year in prison for causing a riot. This marked the end of radical student activism in Singapore. Up to 1975, the government won its battles with students through the use of force; after that, it won without a fight. To accomplish this, it introduced laws overhauling the structure, funding and scope of all campus organisations. Nantah was shut down entirely, on the grounds of

declining student enrolment. Security vetting of prospective hires kept out lecturers who looked like they might encourage activism. At the same time, the PAP built up a highly competitive exam meritocracy and an attractive overseas scholarship system. Coincidentally, this handsomely rewarded students who kept their noses to the grindstone instead of sticking them where they were not wanted.

Also in the 1970s, relations with the press came to a head. In 1971, the government locked up the leadership of the main Chinese-language daily newspaper, *Nanyang Siang Pau*. It also cracked down on two English-language papers, *Eastern Sun* and *Singapore Herald*, resulting in their extinction. Again, Lee wasn't content with the outcome. While prepared to win at any cost, he preferred to win without a public fight. To ensure that the confrontations of 1971 wouldn't recur, parliament passed the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1974. This spelled the death of independent newspapers. The new press law gave the government the power to name newspaper companies' directors. The government thus got a say in appointing editors and setting the editorial direction of every newspaper, ensuring that none would act in a way that precipitated an open war. Through such moves, a system of self-censorship replaced the adversarial relationship that had triggered the use of repressive laws (Chapter 20).

Then, in the mid-1980s, the government felt challenged by an institution with a more formidable record than the press of challenging state power—the church. The government was spooked by the social activism of Catholic church workers. Several were among the 22 individuals arrested under the ISA in 1987's Operation Spectrum. Wary of declaring war on the Catholic Church, the government widened the net to haul in various other critics. It claimed it had uncovered a “Marxist conspiracy” to overthrow the government by force. Again, the ISA crackdown was followed by legislative innovations. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act of 1990 empowered the government to place gag orders on religious preachers deemed to be “carrying out activities to promote a

political cause”. Henceforth, instead of locking up preachers, the government could impose a more calibrated restraining order.

The 1980s also saw the government neutralising the legal fraternity. In Malaysia, Pakistan and other countries, lawyers have used their collective moral authority to speak up against authoritarian moves. The Law Society of Singapore, under the leadership of prominent critic Francis Seow, tried this in 1986 when the government proposed new controls on foreign media. Seow had stated that he wanted to see a “more assertive and caring bar”. The society’s leadership also included Teo Soh Lung and Tang Fong Har. All three were detained under the ISA.

In the meantime, the government amended the Legal Profession Act. The Society would be allowed to comment on Bills only when invited to do so by the government. The government could also nominate three members to the Society’s council. In addition, the government formed the Singapore Academy of Law as an alternative and more conservative voice of the legal profession. Individual lawyers would continue to play disproportionate roles as public intellectuals, critics and opposition politicians. A handful of human rights lawyers such as Peter Low, M. Ravi and Choo Zheng Xi also emerged, taking on cases with a significant public interest aspect, thus nudging the court to clarify its thinking on matters like contempt of court and how long the government can keep a vacated parliamentary seat unfilled. As a collective force, though, the profession poses no threat.



The net effect of the government’s calibration of its coercion has been remarkable. The government’s dominance has increased, even as its use of overt force has diminished. Detention without trial has not been used against peaceful political adversaries since the 1980s. The last time a newspaper was closed down by yanking its licence was in the 1970s. The government has successfully transitioned to behind-the-scenes controls. In many sectors, it has been able to

stack the leadership of key institutions with loyalists and pragmatists with no appetite for heroics. The old repressive laws are still on the books, of course, underwriting the government's dealings, sort of like how a country's currency is backed by gold reserves you don't need to see in normal times.

Calibrated coercion strengthens the ideological pillars of PAP dominance. The rarity of open conflict and brutal repression creates the sense that Singapore's stability is due to a strong consensus. It also makes it easier to preserve the loyalty of members of the establishment, not all of whom may share Lee Kuan Yew's values. Operation Spectrum of 1987 showed that an excess of coercion can strain internal cohesion. It later emerged that senior cabinet minister S. Dhanabalan was so uncomfortable with the arrests that he resigned from government a few years later, so as not to put himself in such a compromising situation again. Other establishment members who publicly voiced misgivings were Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who rose to become deputy prime minister, and Walter Woon, who later became attorney general.

The main impact, though, is on the opposition and other pro-democracy forces. On the one hand, they are able to operate with less political risk. They need not worry about arbitrary arrest the way their counterparts do in many other countries. On the other hand, they cannot tap into a wide and deep sense of injustice fed by rampant human rights abuses. Chee Soon Juan tried to address this through his campaign of civil disobedience, deliberately breaking public assembly laws to invite repression that he hoped would backfire on the government. But the authorities astutely avoided any show of excessive force. Chee's lawbreaking events were usually handled on the ground not by riot police or paid goons (like in Hong Kong), but by soft-spoken police officers, usually in plain clothes and with no visible weapons, not even megaphones. The government would settle scores later, in the courts rather than on the streets. Thus, Chee was never rewarded with dramatic news photos or video of dignified protesters being brutalised by the state—the kind of images the Malaysian government, for example,

regularly gifts to its opponents. The government still uses authoritarian methods, but to a degree that most Singaporeans seem happy to live with. The total number of such incidents—defamation suits, prosecutions of activists and bloggers, and high-profile censorship, for example—amount to just a handful each year, making it easy for the public to brush them aside as the exception rather than the rule.

Politicians on either side of the spectrum don't like talking about calibrated coercion. The government denies that any form of coercion has anything to do with its success. Its opponents argue that there's nothing calibrated about its use of force. Nevertheless, the PAP's calibrated coercion may be one of its most underrated capacities. As far as superhero comparisons go, the party of Lee is less Iron Man, more Doctor Strange: a master of a vast repertoire of powers ranging from massive blasts of fire and energy, to the mystical arts of invisibility, telepathy and hypnosis—defeating opponents without laying a hand on them.