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Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity

Stephan Ortmann

Abstract: This study wants to shed new light on the politics of Singapore's national identity invention. Since independence in 1965, the Singaporean government has tried to generate a sense of national identity in Singapore. While at first, the priority was on pragmatic values to promote the economic development, this changed in the late 1980s when the government became concerned with the widespread materialism within the society. As an alternative, so-called Asian values sought to provide an ideological alternative and a new basis for a stronger national identity. At the same time, average Singaporeans have developed their own unique conceptions of the city-state's national identity, which sometimes contradict the official nation-building efforts and thus constitute a subtle form of opposition. Many Singaporeans demand greater participation in the negotiation of their Singaporean identity, which demonstrates the difficulty of constructing a sustainable authoritarian civic national identity.

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1 Introduction

On August 17, 2008, at the time of the 2008 National Day Rally speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's table tennis team played against the Chinese team in the final match during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Singapore lost, but was able to secure the silver medal, the first Olympic medal for the city-state since 1960. While the media and the political leadership celebrated this victory, many Singaporeans were less than enthusiastic. The reason for this was that the members of Singapore's Olympic team, Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu, and Feng Tianwei, had been consciously won over by the government in its bid to attract foreign talent (FT) and had become naturalized citizens only two years previously. When Beijing-born Li Jiawei appeared on Chinese TV and spoke of being happy to play on home turf and of being a *Zhongguoren* (Chinese national), it reverberated across Singapore's blogosphere. And then there was the video of the Olympic opening ceremony where Li dragged the Singaporean flag across the ground, which many considered to be an affront to Singapore. She and her team mates were not real Singaporeans, many online comments asserted. The issue of Singapore's national identity had become one of the hottest topics of on- and offline discussions in the summer of 2008.

This demonstrates that the definition of what constitutes Singapore's national identity is playing an increasingly important role in politics. Perhaps because Singapore is a prime example of the attempt to construct an authoritarian civic national identity, a large body of academic research has been conducted on this topic. Most of this research focuses on the role of the government in promoting a national identity and generally distinguishes between two phases: the first usually starts after independence in 1965 when national identity was not a top priority of the government, and the second from the late 1980s onwards when its significance on the national agenda was heightened. However, there are also a number of scholarly works, mostly in cultural studies, that analyze the role of average Singaporeans' response to the government's nation-building efforts. These works emphasize that there is a discourse of subtle resistance, which permeates popular nationalist works. Since national identity cannot be viewed simply as a government project, these popular discourses must be taken into account. Popular discourses about national identity are quite different from official nation-building efforts, and thus constitute a subtle form of opposition that could increase the pressure on the political regime to allow further liberalization.

2 The Concept of National Identity in the Singaporean Context

Before we can analyze the role of national identity in Singaporean politics, it is helpful to understand what the concept of a *nation* actually means and how it relates to this multiethnic city-state. Because the city-state cannot boast a long history and is inhabited by a multitude of different ethnicities, the Singaporean nation (if it actually exists) has to be considered a distinctly modern and decidedly constructed phenomenon. Ethnicity cannot be the central focus of a definition of "nation" here because the multiethnic immigrant state with its colonial history would be never be able to become a nation if that were the case. As 75 percent of the population is Chinese, 13.7 percent is Malay, 8.7 percent Indian, and 2.6 percent is made up of other nationalities, mostly from Central Asia and Europe, Clammer (1985) suggests that Singaporeans are characterized by citizenship and not national identity.

To understand the process of identity politics in Singapore, it is necessary to distinguish between ethnic and civic national identity. The most crucial difference between the two is that in the former, citizenship is believed to be inherited from birth, while in the latter, it is voluntaristic and can be acquired (Greenfeld 1992: 11). Despite the legitimate criticism of classifying countries according to either civic or ethnic national identities, it is still important to recognize the predominance of either civic or ethnic concepts in government or oppositional discourses. It is obvious that it is problematic for a government in a multiethnic state to promote an ethnic identity because it would favor one group over another and create tensions. It is, therefore, more likely that national identity will be based on civic symbols like the constitution, an oath of allegiance, or the flag.

The nation is constructed through what Hobsbawm has called the invention of tradition:

> 'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

This implies the conscious act on behalf of elites in generating a common culture that is supportive of the political system. This is important because, as Gellner points out,

> [a] mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and

> when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it (Gellner 1983: 7).

This results in loyalties to the nation and, once it becomes embodied in a state, also to the state. Thus, it is an important asset to governments around the world, which depend on the loyalty of their citizens.

While a supportive notion of national identity is therefore desirable for any ruling elite, the ability to generate this sentiment is not unproblematic, especially in multiethnic societies, which do not want to risk the disintegration of the country. The idea that national identity can be successfully promoted is based on the assumption that popular nationalism is always the result of elite promotion of nationalist tenets. Joseph M. Whitmeyer (2002), however, points out that there are also cases in which elites have promoted nationalism that was rejected by the population and cases in which popular nationalism developed prior to the elite adopting this discourse.

As a consequence, it is impossible to conceive of a civic national identity that is solely promoted by a ruling elite, but must instead be continually renegotiated between the government and the people, as Hill and Lian (1995) have recognized in the Singapore context. In Singapore's case, as this paper will show, it is highly doubtful whether the majority of the population is adopting the kind of nationalism promoted by the government; instead, it is developing an alternative conception that rejects the elite notion of democracy with the supremacy of one party and the idea of Singapore as a cosmopolitan city.

These findings raise doubts about the viability of an authoritarian form of civic nationalism. Greenfeld (1992) has suggested that while ethnic nationalism can only be authoritarian, civic nationalism may be individualistic, libertarian, or authoritarian. In the Singapore context, Brown (2000) furthermore argues that the collectivist and developmentalist authoritarian civic nationalism that is propagated requires a top-down process in which "state elites claim that they themselves are the objects of patriotic loyalty, and it is they who articulate the true will of the collective nation" (Brown 2004: 53). However, repeated government attempts to strengthen Singapore's sense of belonging indicate that civic nationalism requires effective feedback mechanisms. While the government has tried to improve its communication channels, the unwillingness to relax its disincentives regarding free speech and political participation has obstructed the development of a negotiated concept of national identity. If the government continues to place a high priority on national identity, it could motivate the rulers to introduce further liberalization of the political system.

3 National Identity as a Government Project

Most research on Singapore's national identity politics has focused on the role of the state (i.e., Willmott 1989; Chua and Kuo 1998; Hussin 2004; Hill and Lian 1995; Brown 1998, 2000; Martin and Feng 2006; for a critical perspective: Velayutham 2007). Some researchers even assert that the nation is only comprised of the ruling party because opposition parties are inconsequential and civil society is weak (Chew 2000). Many of these studies distinguish between two different phases: an emphasis on the development of the economy from 1965 until the 1980s when the government increasingly became aware that economic growth alone cannot be the only basis for Singapore's national identity. Since the late 1980s, the concept of national identity has therefore gained in prominence, trying to reverse the negative effects of the emphasis on economic growth. Despite countless government campaigns and exhortations, this latter project has not been very successful so far. This can, in part, be blamed on the government's top-down approach, which largely rejects popular notions of national identity that contradict the ruler's development plans such as the use of *Singlish* as a national language, which is actively disparaged.

First, after Singapore was ejected from the Malaysian Union and became independent in 1965, the government promoted pragmatic values, which were geared toward economic growth. These mainly focused on modernity, development, and economic success (Kong and Yeoh 1997: 219). This meant that there was no need to pay any special attention to cultural aspects, which were still regarded as an obstacle to the developmentalist plans. As Hill and Lian (1995) have emphasized, it was not the government's intention to generate strong nationalist sentiments during this era.

The primary goal of the ruling party was to continue the reorganization of the economic and social order. A defiant Lee Kuan Yew announced shortly after separation from the mainland (Lee had been an advocate of Singapore's merger with Malaysia):

> And I say, we will progress. I was sad not because Singapore was going to suffer: no. I was sad because by this separation, we could not help millions, several millions of our own people, our own countrymen – in Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak – to progress with us. That was why I was sad (qt. in: Han et al. 1998: 310).

This shows that the rulers' primary focus during this time was not on promoting a particular Singaporean identity, but rather the unlikely position of a small city-state surrounded by Malay states. From this sprang the need for a tight integration of Singapore in the global economy in order to achieve economic growth. This also had the consequence that instead of

relying primarily on local businesses, which was a common strategy employed by nationalists, the government actively attracted multinational corporations to augment the existing government-linked corporations.

Nevertheless, the government initialized measures to promote a sense of national identity during its first phase. The rulers were aware that Singaporeans needed to be motivated to produce economic growth, which was the primary impetus for fostering a sense of national identity during this period. From the very beginning, they promoted the idea of a harmonious society that was collectively working to achieve prosperity for Singapore as a whole. This notion was embedded in a massive housing scheme (known as HDB) and the introduction of National Service for defense purposes. However, more directly, the government also promoted the use of national symbols (like the flag, the national anthem, or the national pledge) and the annual National Day celebrations. The latter represent the most visual display of patriotism, with the display of flags on many buildings in Singapore.

Economic growth needed strong political leadership, which was provided by the self-proclaimed socialist People's Action Party (PAP). It effectively became the sole political party in parliament from 1966 until 1981, when J. B. Jeyeratnam of the Workers Party won a parliamentary seat in the Anson by-election. The party has come to be called the national party as it still dominates all areas of politics and claims to be the only organization capable of providing a stable future for Singapore. The reasons for this are mainly that the party and especially its leaders are closely tied to "national development" and the symbiosis between the party and the state (Vasil 2000). The link between the party and the nation is symbolized in the distinct similarity between the party pledge and the national pledge. This perception has also contributed to the opinion within the ruling party that legitimate opposition cannot come from other parties. The understanding of the PAP as a national party

> raises the party beyond the role of a partisan arbiter of particularistic goals to a national institution, whose primary interests are the representation of the people (Ortmann 2008: 197).

The portrayal of the PAP as a national party thus constitutes an attempt to ideologically undermine dissident groups and thus depoliticize the polity.

In addition, the rulers considered the national press one of the principal instruments with which to promote national identity and support for the political regime. Lee Kuan Yew proposed that the press should support Singapore's national goals. When he claimed in 1971 that the English-language press was not loyal to the new state, he was intent on doing something about it. He even asserted that "we want the mass media to reinforce,

not undermine, the cultural values and social attitudes being inculcated in our schools and universities" (Lee 1971). The media's main task is to create social and political stability and also to advocate government policy. It has been described as "an 'extraordinary mass ceremony' within which the Singaporean nation is imagined [and] in which the government is a dominant voice" (Bokhorst-Heng 2002: 560). Most of the press in Singapore today is under the control of government-linked corporations. Even though there are sometimes dissenting articles in the newspapers, they are consistently followed by a government response. Furthermore, measures such as out-of-bounds markers (a warning when you have crossed into forbidden territory) or the more potent libel suit have created an atmosphere in which self-censorship is widespread.

An important method of generating large support for the developmental plans of the government was the use of the crisis motive. The relatively small size of the city-state, the scarcity of natural resources, and its location within "enemy territory" (a Chinese city surrounded by Malay states), among other threats, are all used to generate a widespread sense of psychosis. Instead of constructing myths of national identity, Singapore's rulers legitimated their role with an "ideology of 'survivalism' which specifically stressed the lack of national identity" (Brown 2000: 93). The ability of the government to successfully manage these crises demonstrates its ability to govern. "This strategy is used quite openly and with the conscious goal of enhancing the dependence on the state", say Hill and Lian (1995: 34). At the same time, however, this approach has also weakened any sense of national belonging for many Singaporeans because it has generated a rational sense of a cost-benefit analysis instead of an emotional attachment to cultural values. This has enhanced the negativity that is embedded in Singaporeans' popular conception of the nation, which will be analyzed more closely in the next section.

The lack of faith in developing a unique Singaporean identity is reflected in the long-lasting policy toward national monuments. After independence, Singapore's founders were convinced that Singapore could not be defined by its past, but would rather have to be built as a vision of the future, "to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation", as the National Pledge reads. The past was relegated as a lesson for the future. Old buildings, which were in the way of development, were torn down. There are not many remnants of Singapore's colonial past that still survive today, and those that do stand in the shadow of Singapore's gigantic skyline. National symbols were created that had little meaning for the average Singaporean. The Merlion is perhaps the best example of these. The imagery is an attempt to link Singapore to its mythical past, namely to the distant pre-

colonial time when the Sumatran prince Sang Nila Utama saw a lion and hence named the city the "lion city" (Fuller 2004). The government decided to build this creature as a tourist attraction and thus the first of its kind was constructed in 1964. The statute was not only meant to create a common past, but it was also about the future. As it was intent on luring foreigners (and their money) to Singapore, it served the tenets of economic development only too well. As Yeo (2003: 250) points out, however, the emphasis on change makes the development of a strong Singaporean identity unrealistic.

As the past was wrought with ethnic tensions and corruption, Singapore's leaders elevated the concepts of "multiracialism" (which includes "multilingualism" and "multireligiosity") and "meritocracy" as the two key founding myths of the Singapore state, both of which incorporate the futuristic characteristics of the Singapore story. The leaders considered these principles essential for Singapore's economic success. As a predominantly Chinese city in the heart of Malayan countries just between Indonesia to the south and Malaysia to the north, any overt favoritism of the Chinese would have generated great difficulties with these important trading partners and also (in the case of Malaysia) water suppliers. The island state was just too small to survive on its own. Furthermore, meritocracy meant that the best and brightest would succeed and not those with family relationships. Singapore's leaders effectively eliminated exogenous corruption, an important criterion for foreign businesses to select the city-state for their operations. This tactic proved to be successful as a large number of multinational corporations began to locate their Southeast Asian headquarters – or at least important operations – in Singapore.

The idea of meritocracy was one of the greatest obstacles to a common national identity right from the beginning. It resulted in a strong sense of elitism among Singapore's ruling class that generated a strong feeling of belonging among the elite. While the first generation had still mainly been politicians, the second generation largely consists of technocrats. A successful academic career, preferably with some time spent at a foreign university, has become a prerogative for the recruitment of new leaders. Due to the apparent successes in the economy and in other areas, it comes as no surprise that the ruling elite now considers itself to have a monopoly on expertise (Hill and Lian 1995: 181).

The second phase started in the late 1980s when Singapore's economy had made significant progress, which was not only evident in the many skyscrapers and large shopping malls, but also in the emergence of a consumer culture. Modernization, it seemed to the leaders, had been accompanied by the vices of Westernization reflected in the increase in individualistic

behavior such as materialism and the atomization of the family. Furthermore, the more Singapore prospered, the more Singaporeans wanted to have more than just economic growth. It was against this backdrop that the government invented what it considered a national ideology (Quah 1990). Known as "Shared Values", this ideology was based on the Asian values discourse and sought to strengthen the strong hierarchical foundations of the society. These are "nation before community and society above self", "family as the basic unit of society", "community support and respect for the individual", "consensus, not conflict", and "racial and religious harmony" (Singapore Government 1991). The "Shared Values" sought to institutionalize the "Asian values" and at the same time make them part of a national Singaporean identity. It is obvious that these values, which mainly emphasize the importance of the group over the individual and stress the importance of consensus, are also an attempt to counter the pressures in favor of democratizing the country in the direction of a liberal democracy.

Since the 1990s the government has become even more active in directly promoting national identity, which is reflected in the relative increase in academic studies and government reports on the topic. The reasons for this are the need for legitimacy that goes beyond mere economic performance and the idea that a "branding" of Singapore would be a competitive asset (Institute of Policy Development 2006). In 1991, a three-year study to evaluate national identity was started, which was used as a reason to reevaluate the teaching of topics related to national identity. There was the belief that the "sense of belonging and feeling of togetherness ('oneness') will not develop naturally in a heterogeneous society" (Wah 1992) and the government had to become more active in this process. To strengthen Singapore's national identity, the government organized the Singapore 21 Committee in 1997, which produced its report in 1999, and the Remaking Singapore Committee established in 2002, which published its report in 2003. The former identified national education, national icons (which includes economic achievements as well as the arts and sports), promoting greater interracial understanding, common memories and myths, and even bonding with new immigrants. While lacking in substance, the Singapore 21 report stressed the importance of having a sense of rootedness and cosmopolitanism at the same time. In contrast, the Remaking Singapore Committee was only interested in strengthening Singaporeans' pride in their own country. Singapore should be remade, the Committee asserted, because "[o]ur survival depends on how we face several simultaneous social and economic challenges in the future" (Remaking Singapore Committee 2003: 10). Singapore should become a "home for all Singaporeans", a "home owned", a "home for all seasons", and "a home to cherish", the Committee declared.

This suggested that the Committee members realized [there was] a demand for greater participation for the development of a strong national identity. As a consequence, the committee proposed some liberalization of the society ("the way forward"), for example Singaporeans should be encouraged to think more critically, while simultaneously "some fundamentals of the relationship [between the government and the people] remain: decisive government action, close people-government cooperation, trust, and open communication channels" (ibid.: 13).

In the last two decades, the government has also increased its efforts during National Day celebrations, which naturally provide an opportune moment to strengthen the national identity of Singaporeans. These are highly illustrative of the government's efforts to inculcate a strong national identity. There are, for instance, the annual National Day Parades, the National Day Rally speech, the National theme and its song, and other rituals related to these celebrations. The National Day Parade, which not only celebrates the nation's existence, but also Singapore's enormous military might, is perhaps the most spectacular. The sheer scale of this demonstration of power is supposed to create a sense of awe, wonderment, and admiration within the population and suggest the extraordinary capabilities of the political regime. Preceding this parade are eight months of meticulous preparation because the event has to be "orchestrated, closely supervised and delimited" (Leong 2001: 8). Leong furthermore notes that "the state attempts to persuade Singaporeans of the naturalness of its ideologies" through the parade (Leong 2001: 6). Since the 1980s, the ruling party has added elements of entertainment to the parade and other National Day events, which have targeted an increasingly pleasure-seeking population.

The Prime Minister's National Day Rally speech also rationalizes the rule of the party and regularly provides additional benefits for Singaporeans so as to avoid social conflict. The carefully staged and choreographed speech reinforces the ideology of the ruling elite. These speeches usually begin with a reference to the vulnerabilities of the state, as well as the challenges and achievements. This is followed by calls for national unity under the professional leadership of the government, which will enable Singapore to prosper. At the same time, the Prime Minister reinforces the notion that without the talented, incorrupt, and pragmatic rule of the PAP, the country would not be able to survive. Often, these oratories also introduce major policy changes. However, Tan (2007: 295) contends that these speeches are not merely meant to create an overarching consensus, but that "the rally speeches have been as much about dividing as they have been about uniting". The ruling party therefore not only maintains hegemony through achieving unity in a common national identity, but also by taking advantage

of common anxieties about the future of the city-state in the context of globalization (ibid.).

The annual national songs are another part of National Day celebrations and are designed to "inculcate a civil religion that directs favour and fervour towards the 'nation'" (Kong 1994: 448). There have been songs in all four official languages, which stress themes such as love, belonging, pride, attaining excellence, unity, commitment to Singapore, productivity, hard work, and teamwork. Because music tends to generate an especially strong emotional response, they are a particularly powerful tool for the ruling elite. The 2008 song, for instance, which was sung in English and Chinese, is a standard pop song with the title "Shine for Singapore". The song mainly stresses the need for achievement and unity, which has been a common theme in many previous National Day songs. The song was performed by Hady Mirza, a popular Singaporean singer, which shows that the government has realized the need to mobilize young Singaporeans, who seem to be most disaffected with the political system and who are viewed as those most likely to emigrate.

The most visual aspect of the National Day celebrations is the display of flags in Singapore's "heartland". The government associates support for the government with the number of flags on HDB blocks and houses. During the 2007 National Day celebrations, the government decided to reduce the regulations concerning the use of the flag. The government stated:

> the National Flag may be flown on vehicles (both private and commercial) during the National Day celebrations period. The National Flag may also be displayed on costumes and personal attire during the period with the requirement only that the Flag be treated with respect at all times (Singapore Government 2007).

This shows that the government is truly concerned about the lack of willingness on the part of many Singaporeans to display the flag. In addition, the government also encouraged foreign companies to display the flag "as a sign of solidarity and friendship with Singapore" (ibid.).

4 Popular Conceptions of a Singaporean National Identity

While the government has been increasingly active in promoting national identity, many Singaporeans have adopted this discourse and reinterpreted its meaning, sometimes changing the intended meaning. Hill and Lian (1995) recount a number of nation-building initiatives by the government that were less than successful, for instance. They regard the government's failure to

implement its unpopular family planning measures as an example of failed communication between the leaders and the population. Furthermore, they also indicate that the government's conception of civic society, which was an attempt to improve the relationship between the government and the people, was instead interpreted in the liberal tradition by a number of interest groups, which began to actively challenge the government. However, Hill and Lian's important work does not include the public discourse prevalent in Singapore concerning national symbols and national sentiment, which has become more visible and active since the introduction of the Internet.

Researchers have come to very contradictory conclusions as to the strength or weakness of Singapore's national identity. There is a large body of survey-based empirical research, some of it financed by the government, which concludes that Singaporeans have developed a strong sense of belonging. The first study was the Singapore National Identity Survey (SNIS), which was conducted in 1976 and came to the conclusion that – contrary to the ruling elite's assertions – a strong Singaporean national identity had developed. MacDougall (1976: 512) optimistically proclaimed: "The Singapore political nation is a long-term political reality in Southeast Asia; the period of the 'politics of survival' is over". Again in 2001, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS 2001) conducted a *survey on the social attitudes of Singaporeans* (SAS), which revealed that nearly all Singaporean respondents felt proud of their country (97 percent) and considered Singapore to be their home (98 percent). Furthermore in 2002, an IPS survey showed that 78 percent of the respondents considered themselves to be more Singaporean than a member of any particular race.

In contrast, however, other studies have concluded that Singapore's population lacks a clear national identification. Hussin, for instance, argues that "Singaporean identity is in its infancy and in an inchoate form" (Hussin 2004: 64). This is reflected in the political alienation of the Malay minority, for one thing, which is expressed in the difference of opinion between Malays and non-Malays toward the Iraq war and the dangers of terrorism. Furthermore, despite government initiatives, Singaporeans have failed to develop their own songs and dances. Finally, the perception of high emigration rates (there is a lack of statistics) suggests that the attachment which young, educated Singaporeans feel toward their homeland is only a small one. Furthermore, Yeo (2003: 249) suggests that economic growth, which is often cited as a major source of pride, is actually too shallow to be a significant source of national identity, especially in the eyes of young people.

This brings us to the question of whether this paradox is the fault of the surveys or due to a lack of objectivity on the part of qualitative observers. I would argue that it is neither. Instead, this puzzle can be untangled when

we consider that Singaporeans' interpretation of their national character is essentially "negative", a sentiment which is also felt deeply. This attitude was expressed well in a letter to the editor of the *Straits Times* penned by Mark Wong (2008), who differentiated between "Singaporeans" and "Singapore citizens", suggesting that there are two kinds of Singaporeans. Wong intended to make a distinction between those who had only recently immigrated to Singapore and those who had been living in the city-state for a long time. He claimed that the "real Singaporeans" differed from the "newcomers" in the following ways:

> They had friends who participated in National Service.
>
> They had friends who struggled through the education system.
>
> They ate, celebrated, learned, and suffered together, as well as they served, and were being served by other Singaporeans.

While the author does mention celebrating, the clear emphasis is on negative experiences like suffering and struggling. Only those who have grown up in Singapore and thus have had a similar overwhelmingly negative experience of life can qualify as true Singaporeans. While rejecting new members of the nation is contrary to the idea of a civic identity, in the Singaporean context newcomers first need to adapt to this Singapore "way of life", which may take a generation to achieve.

It is not surprising, then, that 83 percent of Singaporeans consider materialism a national trait (in contrast, only 63 percent considered the fair treatment of fellow citizens to be a part of the national culture). This was revealed in the same IPS survey that had shown that Singaporeans were increasingly sharing a common identity (Ooi et al. 2002). This materialism has found its expression in the concept of "*kiasu*" or its offspring "*kiasuism*", which Australia's *Macquarie Dictionary* describes as a "national fixation in Singapore" (Hwang et al. 2002). Meaning "the fear of losing out to others", it refers to the strong prevalence of materialism and rabid individualism in Singapore. One writer claims, for example, that "the urge to queue is part of the Singaporean kiasu character" (Leong 2001: 13). He uses this as an argument to explain why some stand in line for the annual National Day Parade without knowing what the parade is actually for, or even caring about its meaning. The term has also been used to describe the Singaporean rulers' fear of political opposition, because they "have shown themselves to be 'kiasu' (literally, afraid to lose)" (Backman 2008). It is therefore not surprising that Catherine Lim, the famous Singaporean novelist and short-story writer, once described *kiasu* playfully as a "phenomenon worthy of anthropological study" in a pseudo-scientific article (Lim 1989: 43):

> It is clearly not an endearing national trait. The surprising thing is that every Singaporean cheerfully speaks of kiasuism as a trait belonging to other Singaporeans, so that kiasuism appears to be some kind of abstraction, rather like the Cheshire Cat's grin without the Cheshire Cat (ibid.: 57).

Hwang et al., however, also point out a positive aspect of *kiasu*, which relates to the work ethic of Singaporeans:

> For instance, a positive kiasu attitude could lead students to put in extra effort into their work or to seek library resources beyond those required for class assignments (Hwang et al. 2002: 75).

While *kiasuism* may not be unique to Singapore, the focus should be on the construction of *kiasu* as a national trait, which is not controlled by the political elite (even if it is a by-product of the excessive emphasis on economic development), and it can therefore be considered a popular invention of tradition in Hobsbawm's sense.

Even if *kiasu* is largely a negative trait, one should note that Singaporeans' popular discourse on national identity also contains some positive invented traditions. The Creole language *Singlish*, for instance, is growing in importance as a symbol of social identity and cohesion in Singapore (Rubdy 2001). Based on the country's lingua franca, English, which was promoted as a language of technology and business as well as socio-political integration, this variety of English mixes English with parts of Chinese grammar and includes many Chinese, Malay, and Indian words. For many Singaporeans, *Singlish* has become a "badge of identity" (Gupta 1994: 4). Even though *Singlish* is also spoken in neighboring countries, Singaporeans have adopted this language as perhaps their most visible national characteristic. Its multiethnic mixture of various cultures and languages fits into the multiracialism dialog of the government. Furthermore, since language is often an inherent part of ethnic nationalism, the Creole language could suggest the birth of a new ethnicity, or at least provide an ethnic component to the largely civic identity in Singapore. However, the government has opposed these attempts and reacted with the Speak Good English movement. Dialects do not fit in with its developmental plans very well, as they contradict the globalization of Singapore's economy. As Peterson makes clear,

> [alt]hough Singlish is the closest thing to a truly indigenous, national language it is considered too colloquial for use in business or education, and it is often virtually unintelligible to native speakers of English from other countries (Peterson 2001: 58-59).

In Singapore, where traditional media such as television and the newspapers are pro-government, national identity is negotiated and reinvented in alternative channels, such as music, theater, movies, fiction (including comic books), and the Internet. There is a large number of studies focusing on different aspects of expressions of national identity in these media. For instance, Lily Kong's study (1994: 448) analyzes the rewriting of national songs as "a form of cultural resistance". She studies the lyrics of songs published in the *Not the Singapore Song Book* (1993), which reveals themes such as *kiasu*, tax rebates, and government policy (procreation), among others. She comes to the conclusion that

> a more educated populace is beginning to express opposition to government policies and to some Singaporean cultural traits, albeit in symbolic and latent, even supportive, rather than overt or confrontational ways (ibid.: 457).

For instance, the parody on the 2008 NDP song called *Sayang Singapore* (which translates as "What a pity, Singapore!") directly criticizes Singapore's lack of freedom of speech:

> Nowhere to go you see,
> This is home, poor me
> Just shut up, that's the key (TalkingCock 2008).

This song reveals the dilemma of many Singaporeans who on the one hand consider the city-state their home and on the other feel excluded from participating in its development. Furthermore, it mirrors Singaporeans' sense of fatality, which bemoans their destiny as victims of a political regime that cannot be changed.

Another field in which artists try to interpret Singapore's national identity is on the big screen. Take Jack Neo's blockbuster movies *I Not Stupid* and *Money No Enough*, for instance, which were largely filmed in *Singlish* and feature the typical lifestyles of Singaporeans. They also tend to emphasize Singapore's negative national characteristics. Despite the fear of censorship, the satirical *I Not Stupid* was even praised by the government despite some criticism of the overbearing nature of the government (Kong 2000).

Popular fiction has also dealt with the role of Singapore. Aside from Catherine Lim, whose satirical work *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978) and *O Singapore, Stories in Celebration* (1989) directly address the question of national sentiment, authors such as Goh Poh Seng (who is credited with having written the first real Singaporean novel, *If We Dream Too Long*), Gopal Baratham (who paints a very sinister image of Singapore in his work), Hwee Hwee Tan (whose book *Mammon Inc.* deals with materialism), and Alfian Sa'at (a playwright and poet who criticized his country in his poem "Singa-

pore, you're not my home") all deal with the topic of national identity, and thus contribute to the invention of what constitutes the Singapore nation. Since the late 1980s, Singaporean writers have become more daring in their challenge of the government, as Means (1994) demonstrates. Furthermore, Wicks (1998) notes, the discussion of Singapore's still evolving identity in literary works emphasizes cultural hybridity as well as generational and social change.

While the official concept of national identity has been subtly reinterpreted as well as criticized in the arts, it has also had an impact on opposition politics. On the one hand, the majority of opposition parties have not challenged the government's dominance in defining national identity. Many in the opposition have been unwilling or unable to assert the nation for their own goals. The Workers' Party stated the following in its 2006 manifesto, for example:

> WP is Pro-Singapore and believes national interest should precede party interest.
> As such we would be prepared to support government policies if they are for the common good of the nation (Workers' Party of Singapore 2006).

This statement clearly demonstrates the party's inability to provide substantial opposition to the ruling party because the interest of the nation is taken as an objective unassailable fact to which partisanship can do more harm than good. This argumentation, however, allows the ruling party to dominate the definition of Singapore's national interests.

In contrast, the leader of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Dr. Chee Soon Juan, arguably the most active dissident in Singapore, frequently calls for a new understanding of Singaporean citizenship. His struggle to achieve political change is based on a strong sense of patriotism. Unlike other dissidents, he has not attempted to emigrate to another country. In one of his books, *Singapore, My Home Too*, he calls on Singaporeans to reclaim their home from the PAP government (Chee 1995: back cover). Allusions to his cause for the soul of the nation are found in all his campaigns. For instance, Dr. Chee began his protest during the 2006 World Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting at Speakers' Corner with references to Singapore's promise for freedom of speech, and after two days he concluded the rally with a recital of the national pledge. In his opinion,

> when the Opposition criticizes the Government, it is in effect making sure that the ruling party remains on its toes and does not do anything that could harm the interests of Singaporeans (ibid.: 169).

This requires checks and balances of the government through opposition parties and an adherence to the basic principles of the constitution, which include civil liberties.

In Singapore today, the most important platform for the negotiation and construction of national identity is the Internet. Unlike music, movies, and theater, Singaporeans who have access to the Internet can contribute to the debate. Furthermore, there are few legal restrictions on the use of the Internet, despite attempts to apply similar legislation as the regular media (Rodan 1998). Nevertheless, as Rodan (1998: 76) explains, "Singapore's authorities have gone to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate their technical capacity to monitor usage of the Internet". The fear of self-censorship on the Internet, however, has so far been exaggerated. The opposition and many other activists have made extensive use of the Internet. The most active party on the Internet is the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), which has vowed to oppose unfair legislation and consequently ignores any form of intimidation. It is perhaps surprising that the ruling elite has not been able to compete on the Internet, as pro-government information is usually drowned by dissenting websites. Some of the more prominent websites are the SDP website, *The Online Citizen*, the *mrbrownshow* website, the *Singapore Daily*, and the *Singapore Window*. There are also a number of newsgroups around, such as the *SGReview*, which regularly publish articles critical of the government. These websites and newsgroups are largely tolerated by the government; in 2008, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong promised to refrain from restricting this freedom of speech unless the discussions touched on certain taboo topics, such as religion, language, or race.

Discussions about national identity on the Internet demonstrate that many Singaporeans are increasingly disaffected with the ruling elite. In recent years, a declining population growth rate has convinced the technocrats within the government to attract a growing amount of foreign talent, often abbreviated as FT. Opposition to the introduction of foreign talent is widespread because many fear that these newcomers will take away Singaporean jobs. Many are suspicious of the government because they do not believe foreigners are necessarily better than Singaporeans. Furthermore, many Singaporeans feel envious of these FTs because the latter do not need to serve in the armed forces. Many Singaporeans feel this foreign influx will lead to overcrowding, depress wages, and FTs may even get preferential treatment in the judicial system.

The debate over the introduction of foreign talent has flamed xenophobic sentiments on the Internet. Goh Meng Seng titled a 2004 article: "A Singapore without Singaporeans, A Nation without Nationhood. That's where we are heading to". These sentiments were especially visible in re-

sponse to two distinct events in 2008. First, there was an Indian national, Amit Nagpalm, who in a letter to the editor in the *Straits Times* demanded the right to buy a government-subsidized HDB flat at the same rate as Singaporeans, which is generally a privilege limited to Singaporean citizens (Nagpal 2008). This led to a great deal of criticism on the Internet. For instance, one blogger (writing under the pseudonym of Young Pay-And-Pay) wrote:

> I, Young Pay-And-Pay, do not welcome you, Amit Nagpal, to my country. I do not welcome your wife. I do not welcome your children. And it's nothing personal; I do not welcome all the foreigners, not just you. And it's nothing racist; I do not welcome all the foreigners, regardless of their race, language or religion.

A second event concerned the role of former Chinese nationals during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The Singaporean table tennis team, which won silver medals, consisted of former Chinese nationals that had become naturalized Singaporean citizens only two years earlier. When one of these players dragged the flag across the ground slightly, many Singaporeans voiced their displeasure.

On the other hand, the Singapore government's emphasis on economic growth has also generated the impression that patriotism is dependent on the government's ability to govern effectively. As mrbiao (2008) notes:

> Personally, I think the decision of whether to put up a flag is a dependent variable of one's love for his/her country. This feeling of patriotism is moderated by the individual's perceptions on whether the government is doing its job to help him/her.

This comment shows that the ruling elite's attempt to closely associate its achievements with the survival of the nation has succeeded. However, this also means that the government has not been capable of generating a strong sense of community which would be helpful in times of economic decline. Even though there are no reliable statistics, the wish of many especially younger Singaporeans to emigrate suggests that the political regime cannot rely on active political support from many Singaporeans.

Opposition to government policies is expressed in the way individuals relate themselves to the Singapore state. Patriotism becomes contingent on the government's willingness to listen to the concerns of the people and to refrain from implementing unjust legislation. For instance, a writer using the pseudonym Meeko writes: "You can force me to pay the ERP fees but you cannot force me to display the flag" (mrbiao 2008). This shows that some are demonstrating their disapproval of the government with a deliberate refusal to display the flag.

While the dissatisfaction with government policies has resulted in xenophobic tendencies, the topic of national identity is also often used to raise criticism against the ruling elite and the political system per se. For example, the *Online Citizen* asked its readers in July 2008 to define the values of democracy, peace, progress, justice, and equality, which are represented by the five stars on Singapore's national flag. The comments show the deficiencies, especially concerning democracy, justice, and equality, but many also reject the notion that Singapore has progressed (economic growth is not enough) and that there is peace (one person suggests that peace is only superficial, while another claims the inability of the government to capture an escaped terrorist is a sign that peace is lacking). Another interesting result of this discussion is the creative attempt to also redefine the stars and the crescent moon. One writer suggests the stars look like dollar signs, which another picks up and states: "Replace all stars by $ sign, and the moon by the mouth of PAP who devour the money". Another reader, self-named Conjob, suggests that "somehow I view the position of the crescent on the left as representing the sly smile of the government laughing with all the money". And he has a solution for another redefinition: "The crescent should be positioned below the 5 stars, representing the smile of a nation when all the 5 values are realised" (*The Online Citizen* 2008).

The online discussions suggest that Singapore's authoritarian civic nationalism is not tenable in its present form because the expectations of participating in the nation are considered an important part of Singapore's self-conception. It is not surprising then that the civic national identity discourse of the government has raised hopes within the population that full participatory democracy should be achieved. It is, therefore, no surprise that Singaporeans are increasingly willing to publicly voice their dissatisfaction with the way democracy is practiced in the city-state. They demand greater rights to participate in the political process. Singapore's civic national identity thus resides with the wishes and demands of the citizens. The repeated lack of responsiveness to these wishes on the part of the ruling elite has resulted in demands for political reform that often rely on a conception of Singapore as a democratic nation. Thus, national identity has become a principal bearer of democratic thought and could potentially mobilize more Singaporeans to challenge the political regime.

5 Conclusion

Even after forty-three years of independence, national identity in Singapore is still a contested and highly relevant issue. For the government, generating a strong sense of national identification is seen as important for enhancing

the citizens' loyalty to the state. This is crucial for the ruling elite, whose legitimacy is based largely on economic performance and effective governance. For many Singaporeans, however, the role of democracy enshrined in the constitution, the national oath, and the flag has become a cornerstone of Singaporeans' understanding of what the nation should be like. While the government has promoted the idea of an illiberal "Asian" democracy, many Singaporeans have adopted a much more liberal notion of democracy. At the same time, Singapore's national identity markers remain largely "negative", and while many long for greater participation, most have become convinced that nothing can be changed. Nevertheless, as the online discussions demonstrate, there is some potential for discontent that could lead to greater mobilization against a government that could eventually be considered to be governing against the interests of the people.

Finally, this article bodes ill for any government that wants to construct a sustainable authoritarian civic identity. In fact, the evidence seems to indicate that authoritarian regimes who want to rely on popular nationalism as support for their authoritarian rule, even in times of economic problems, cannot rely on civic notions of nationalism, but would have to emphasize ethnic nationalism instead. The latter, however, would generate ethnic tensions in multinational states and, while not leading to democracy, would also weaken the ruling elite because of the threat of civil war. In the case of Singapore with its multiethnic immigrant population, ethnic nationalism is not even an option. So, in conclusion, authoritarian regimes in multiethnic states are left with just one option: to deemphasize national identity or risk conflicts or, as in case of a civic national identity, democratization. Singapore's rulers, however, continue to believe they can achieve a strong national identity that supports the political regime without significantly liberalizing the political system.

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