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Book Reviews

Barr, Michael D. (2014), *The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence*

London: I. B. Tauris, ISBN-13 978-1780762340, 224 pages

With *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, Barr makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Singapore's opaque governance and political elite. At a time of epochal political changes in Singapore comes this excellent analysis of the inner system of the city-state's power centre. Thanks to its clear structure and accessible style, Barr's work will be appreciated not only by scholars but also by a wider audience with a general interest in Singapore's politics and history.

The book is divided into eight chapters that touch on different aspects of the elite governance and the central role played in that context by the Lee family. After a short introduction, Barr sums up his main arguments in Chapter 2. The subsequent four chapters chart Singapore's elite politics over time, from pre-independence until the completion of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's takeover. Barr gives a detailed account of how the initial elite was formed around the late prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), and how he and his inner circle established and formed the initial mechanism for elite recruitment that is still in use today. In Chapter 4, Barr focuses on LKY's consolidation of power and how he became the *primus inter pares* among Singapore's top-level policy-makers. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss other developments under the elder Lee's rule as well as the period of transition to his son's rule. A practical guide to the current elite (most applicable to the approximate year 2012) is provided in Chapter 7. In his final chapter, Barr offers his take on the political situation after the 2011 elections, in which the opposition made some inroads for the first time.

According to Barr, Singapore's evolution since independence can be divided into three generations of leadership. The first and most influential was that of LKY. It was followed by the intermediate prime minister-ship of Goh Chok Tong. Eventually, the third and current phase began under the younger Lee. Barr elaborates five progressive features that best explain the power networks of this special country: "Singapore's small physical size and population; the formation of the ruling 'elite'; the patronage of Lee Kuan Yew and his family; the centrality of 'Chineseness' in Singapore's national identity; and the importance, though not to the point of absolute necessity, of a military background" (p. 13). These phases are then also used as a structure for the succeeding chapters.

The forming of the founding elite began before independence, when LKY and many future leaders regularly gathered in what would later become known as the “Oxley Road circle,” in reference to LKY’s home at 38 Oxley Road. These insiders would become the core of the People’s Action Party (PAP). The core of this group existed until the final years of LKY’s rule. It was also an atypical group of Singaporeans because LKY preferred people he knew from his studies in England and who would be among the minority of English-speakers.

Over time, a clear pattern of successive elite recruitment emerged. LKY and his senior colleagues focused on national scholarship winners. These included a disproportionately high number of winners of the President’s Scholarship (4–10 students per year from 1964 to 1970 and 41 in total, 11 of whom later took up senior positions within the elite government) (p. 26f). In 1971 this programme of scholarship recruitment was complemented by the creation of the Singapore Armed Forces Overseas Scholarship (SAFOS), a programme open only to (male) National Service personnel. Interestingly, the first batch included LKY’s son, the current PM.

While establishing a system of elite recruitment, LKY and his senior colleagues also consolidated power in the country, controlling all other parts of commercial and social life in the city. Despite being almost predominantly ethnic Chinese with a few Indian colleagues, they began to co-opt Malay leaders into the PAP (p. 39). The takeover extended to other parts of society, too. Barr mentions the marginalisation of the judiciary and legislature after 1968 (p. 31) and the takeover of the trade unions through externally educated professionals after 1977 (p. 48). By 1981 more than four-fifths of Singapore’s population lived in government-run public housing (Housing Development Board, HDB). HDB flats not only provided a key element of the PAP’s welfare policy – namely, affordable and decent housing – but also allowed the regime to control who lived where. In parallel to these social developments, the ruling elite took control of or intruded into Singapore’s corporate world. Through its Chinese associations (p. 33), and more recently the state funds Temasek and GIC, the government/PAP has not only controlled companies directly or indirectly but also pursued a policy of economic development that left little space for small and medium-sized companies. This in turn left young and ambitious Singaporeans with few attractive job prospects outside of the government or state-controlled companies (p. 59).

Over time, LKY’s government thereby established control over all parts of Singaporean life – from the executive to the legislative and judi-

ciary to social groups and the corporate world. The regime had also defined a pathway to its elite circles which Barr describes as follows: “A young man needed to win a top scholarship that bonded him to the civil service. He then needed to perform at a high level of competence and demonstrate that he was highly attuned to the needs of not only his administrative masters, but also his political masters. There was normally a period – usually years – when he found himself working in close physical and professional proximity to a very senior member of the elite, with the optimal pathway for someone without a blood or marriage relationship being a close professional association with Lee Kuan Yew or, later, Lee Hsien Loong. From there one could be expected to rise through one or more of the crucial ministries around which power pivoted: the Prime Minister’s Office, and the ministers of Defence, Education, Finance, Trade and Industry, and Home Affairs. If Lee and his inner circle judged that the youngish mandarin had the potential to go into politics, he was invited to join the PAP, run for parliament and if he made the cut, be appointed to the Cabinet in short order” (p. 48f). This selection mechanism remains demanding and narrow. One interesting phenomenon according to Barr is that despite adding more members to the elite circles, the amount of talent there has been relatively small, leading to a situation in which “the government keeps re-activating the old guard for crises and trouble-shooting” (p. 47).

Another aspect of the Singaporean system of elite selection is discrimination, which Barr discusses in his fifth chapter. On the one hand, immigration policy is de facto geared towards preferential treatment of Chinese so as to maintain their ethnic dominance (p. 68). On the other hand, the selection process begins so early in the education system that the elite is practically reproducing itself: “Despite the development of scholarships, bursaries and other aids to help gifted students from low-income socio-economic backgrounds, these elite schools and the elite streams within ordinary schools drew their pupils overwhelmingly from the predominantly Chinese upper-middle-class socio-economic group” (p. 73). The most prominent educational establishments that paved the way towards the elite scholarships “were grouped into ‘families’ of schools [in the 1990s], with the most prominent ‘families’ being the Raffles family [...] and the Hwa Chong family [which] consistently provided 70–80 per cent of the top scholarship winners and candidates for the elite” (p. 75). A great strength of the book is that Barr explains these processes very well to outsiders.

He also provides an interesting account of powerful individuals and the hierarchy as of 2012 (p. 115f). In summing up the current situation

of elite politics in Singapore, Barr suggests that it is “a lot easier to understand Singapore if you put aside notions of modernity and ordinary governance, let alone democracy, and begin from the premise that it is a Chinese family business, complete with a patriarch, an eldest son, *guanxi* networks and questions of cross-generational continuity” (p. 108). The challenge for family businesses, of course, is that too much power may be vested in one person. This means that those closest to the patriarch, as well as the patriarch himself, are hardly accountable (p. 126). The most pressing danger, then, is that the self-recruiting nature of Singapore’s elite governance creates a system of “group think” (p. 109), an observation that is being increasingly raised in the context of the city-state by commentators like Donald Low.

After having outlined the general workings of Singapore’s elite, Barr offers his preview of what Singapore’s future may look like. Given that since the time of Barr’s writing, Lee Kuan Yew has died (during Singapore’s 50th anniversary year) and general elections have been held, it is worth noting how well Barr predicted the developments that have come about since. The opposition’s structural weakness, in Barr’s opinion, is that it presents itself as being just as elite as the PAP (p. 135), though a bit more democratic and honest. This leaves the author with “trouble identifying a likely contender to challenge the Lee family” (p. 142) – whether from inside or outside the PAP. The dominance of the PAP and current PM Lee has only been strengthened by the recent election, in September 2015, underlining Barr’s assertion that “there are no major forces in the country that even seek drastic change” (p. 142). And even if there were some – and, of course, opposition groups as well as critical online media and academics do exist – an electoral defeat would still mean that all the elite’s/PAP’s allies continue to serve in relevant social, corporate, media, and administrative institutions (p. 136). Barr goes on to suggest that “the essential outline of the networks of power and influence described in this book will be recognisable for a long time into the future: ethnically and culturally dominated by Chinese from similar educational and social backgrounds; eased by personal networking at all levels, particularly in matters of recruitment and regeneration; bureaucratic and professional; and dominated by (Chinese) scholar-soldiers. Furthermore, it will most likely continue to be centred on the Lee family” (p. 142).

Barr’s book provides an excellent account of the functioning of Singapore’s elite. His detailed look into the recruitment mechanisms of the elite as well as the exemplary charting of the path to power of a number of elite members not only make the book stand out for its sensi-

tive understanding of Singapore but also allow the book to be used as a concrete guide for the connections of prominent and powerful members of the elite. The author benefits from his long-time study of Singapore, which enabled him to put developments into a wider context. Writing as an outsider helped Barr to avoid close personal networks that bind people together in such a small state and allowed him take a more critical view. Barr has provided the most detailed account thus far of Goh Chok Tong's failed struggles to establish his own power base after he took over the PM post from LKY.

Barr's physical absence from Singapore, however, may have left him without a view into some of the debates that surfaced during the 2011 election campaign and have since persisted. Singapore's population is becoming increasingly critical of the continuous immigration; Chinese immigrants are now seen by many as the most unwanted group. The elite, as society at large, distinguishes between the "original" Chinese immigrants (and their descendants), who form the Singaporeans of today, and the most recent mainland Chinese immigrants. This delineation may limit the pool from which the future elite are selected: in the future, recruitment will be based on these younger Singaporeans who now have English as their mother (and normally only) tongue. More recent debates have also centred on the challenges of failed meritocracy. This is a point that Barr contextualises as the problem of group think. Although the PAP holds firm political and economic control over the country, the more repressive Singaporean system with this kind of skewed elite recruitment leaves little room for creativity and new thinking. The soldier-turned-civil-servant-turned-politician comes from the same bubble as their elite parents. This top 5 per cent is disconnected from the lives of ordinary Singaporeans. Where these tensions lie exactly and how they can be reconciled would be a worthy future project for Michael Barr. In the meantime, his current book provides excellent insights into the current Singaporean elite and its policies.

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