**The PAP cadre system**

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*Most Singaporeans are familiar with the outward trappings of the PAP, but very few are aware of what goes on in its inner sanctum. KOH BUCK SONG lifts the veil on the cadre system and lesser known activities of the 10,000-strong ruling party.***

THE People's Action Party has more than 1000 cadres, whose only distinction for being recognised as stalwarts is the right to vote in the party's top leadership every two years.

Although this right may be seen by some as a privilege, there are no other perks that set cadres apart from the ordinary members of Singapore's most successful political party.

Disclosing this to *Insight*, the party's second assistant secretary-general, Mr Wong Kan Seng, notes that grassroots leaders receive benefits such as housing and school admission priority and some limited carparking perks in Housing Board estates, but PAP cadres and members get nothing.

It may be hard to believe in today's world, in which material rewards for any kind of service are a norm, but cadres are accorded no tangible appreciation, not even a thank-you dinner.

As a mark of their commitment to the party's philosophy and aims, they are promoted into an inner circle. But other than their being invited to elections for the party's central executive committee, no one can tell a cadre apart from other members.

The party, formed in 1954 and in power since 1959, has had cadres since the 1950s, when confining the power of electing party leaders to a select group was seen as a way to stop communist infiltration.

Mr Wong, who is Home Affairs Minister, says the party has always been open about its cadres. "Every other year, we have an ordinary party conference attended by them, so where is the secrecy?"

But the fact is that the number of cadres has never been disclosed. The party headquarters considers it "privileged information". The register of cadres remains confidential.

Earlier estimations had hovered around a few hundred. Mr Wong says the total has been growing steadily over the years.

Former MPs are surprised when told of the 1000-odd figure. Even serving MPs are not all aware of the total, nor have they seen the cadre register.

The cadre system has always been veiled in secrecy. Those connected to the party clam up whenever the subject is broached, referring the curious to the party's HQ executive committee chairman, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, or the vice-chairman, Mr Wong.

Mr Wong says the party does not instruct its cadres to keep their identities secret. On their reluctance to be identified, he says: "Of course, the person will not want to boast about it."

The party does not want to create a sense of hierarchy, he adds. Not every member clad in all-white is a cadre, or needs to be one.

A former MP observes: "It is Singapore culture. If you start claiming things, people start looking askance at you." Some might also want to guard the sense of mystique, he adds. "The less seen, the more to be wondered at."

On the lack of privileges for cadres, he notes that being elevated to a higher status is equated with something prestigious. "You know you are among the elite, the trusted few. People are quite happy when told they have become cadres."

Mr Wong believes that most people join the party because they support, and want to contribute to, a party that has served the nation well.

Agreeing, Mr Mah Guan Lin, 62, assistant director of the PAP HQ in New Upper Changi Road, who has been a party member for about 16 years, confirms that members enjoy no incentives or preferences of any kind.

So why join? He explains: "We join because we know this is a good system that we want to protect. Through our dialogue with MPs, we understand things better and get a chance to find out more, that's the only advantage."

Like other senior PAP members, Mr Mah is tight-lipped about whether he is a cadre, but as he is one of the few non-MPs to sit on the party's sub-committees, there can be little doubt that he is one.

A cadre is nominated by his MP from among the outstanding activists in his branch. About 100 candidates are put up each year. Selection is done by three interview panels of four or five ministers and MPs each. The spread of backgrounds covers age, race, language and religion, ground feel and educational qualification.

Aside from the cadre system, the party's other aspects are not so mysterious.

The only exception is the central executive committee (CEC), the pinnacle of party leaders elected at party ordinary conferences by the cadres. The next conference will be at the end of this year or early next year.

The present 16-member CEC is headed by the secretary-general, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. The chairman is Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan and the vice-chairman, Law and Foreign Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar. The other members are all Cabinet ministers except Senior Minister of State (Education and Health) Aline Wong, Ayer Rajah MP Tan Cheng Bock and former MP Ch'ng Jit Koon.

In her 1971 political science thesis, *Singapore's People's Action Party: Its History, Organisation and Leadership* (Oxford University Press), Ms Pang Cheng Lian, now roving ambassador to Italy and Switzerland, describes the CEC voting as a "closed system", in which "the cardinals appoint the pope and the pope appoints the cardinals".

Mr Wong says this practice is to make the CEC election manageable, by restricting it to a smaller number of senior party members, out of the more than 10,000 ordinary members.

He points out that the candidate list for the incoming CEC is not drawn up only by the outgoing committee, but also voted on by all MPs.

On the CEC's functions, he discloses that meetings are held just before Cabinet meetings, a few times a year, as and when there are issues to discuss, such as the agenda for upcoming party meetings.

The next-lower level committee, the HQ exco, formed more than 10 years ago, looks after the party's administration. Party accounts, circulars, reports and other matters are handled by fewer than 10 full-time staff at the largely functional party HQ building.

The exco also oversees nine sub-committees on appointments, constituency relations, education, information, PAP awards, political education, publicity and publications, social and recreational, and Malay affairs.

Other matters include feedback on national issues through informal networks of the party branches in all 83 constituencies.

About 1000 new members were approved in each of the last two years. But the party is no hurry to add to that number.

A prospective new member who has ulterior motives of seeking business gains from the *"guanxi"* of political affiliation can find his membership application "deferred". Some have been asked to go away and chalk up more community work before applying again later.

The care taken over who are accepted even as ordinary members would seem to be justified. A former MP recalls that in the 1970s, there were members he "would not touch with a barge pole". One member, for instance, tried to use his party connections to help his relative, a secret society member, get out of jail.

When it comes to mobilising the ground for a general election, the party can supplement its 10,000-strong membership with some 500 volunteers per branch, mainly friends and relatives of members.

The PAP runs about 300 kindergartens in the 83 wards, under the PAP Community Foundation, a charitable institution set up in the 1980s with a separate set-up chaired by Dr Tony Tan.

Political education talks, held about five times a year, are usually given by a minister or at least a parliamentary secretary, on subjects such as health, education and foreign affairs.

Held on Sunday mornings, the talks have a typical audience of about 800, comprising party members nominated by party branches and guests invited by MPs.

The party's main source of funds, Mr Wong reveals, comes from the $650 to $1000 deducted from MPs' allowances every month. Office-holders contribute more. Contributions also flow in from donors and well-wishers.

Each party branch, which has about 100 members and its own sub-committees looking after different areas, also has its own Young PAP and Women's Wing branches.

The roles and leaders of these two branches of the party are known publicly. YP, chaired by Information and the Arts Minister George Yeo and catering to the young, has its unique functions such as a policy studies group and Internet group.

The YP has an Internet website, but the party has no plans to start a main website, believing its party organ Petir and other communications channels to be adequate.

The Women's Wing, chaired by Dr Aline Wong, looks at particular concerns such as women's and family issues.

There has been some debate whether the PAP is a cadre party tending towards authoritarian control or a mass party with more devolution of power. Ms Pang, for one, raises the question in her thesis: "Is the PAP a cadre party masquerading as a mass party?".

The present party structure would suggest that, to all intents and purposes, the ground operations are largely autonomous, with the MPs deciding, for instance, whether or not to interview applicants for ordinary party membership.

And since the only thing that makes a cadre special is the right to vote, the day-to-day functions of the party are more democratic than some might imagine.

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