Report for Independent Study Module

By  
Reuben X. Wang  
A0149634X

Advisor  
Assoc Prof Feng Chen-Chieh

Department of Geography  
National University of Singapore

# Introduction

This report accompanies the ISM’s website. This is meant to provide a more academic and conclusive account of my research findings. Web visualisation is, I discovered, a *reductionist* narrative format. Too much words, and too much specificity, spoils the soup. Web visualisation is compelling because it allows users to discover things on their own and form their own conclusions. I am thus using this annex as both a proof-of-work and as a way to explain why I chose the narrative elements I chose to peruse in the end.

The next few parts will be an exploration of the academic narratives of the 1955 elections. It will first lay out the institutional context for the 1955 election,

# The Institutional Context

## The Racial Context and the Question of a Joint Malaya

Pre-war Singapore was the capital of the British Crown Colony of the Straits Settlement. Along with Singapore, major territories of the Straits Settlements included the mainland settlements of Penang and Malacca. After the Japanese and Thai occupation of 1942-1945, the British returned a peninsular ripe with ethnic conflict and lawlessness. Nevertheless, they followed through on their planned rationalisation of British holdings in Malaya. The Straits Settlements were dissolved in 1946. Penang, Malacca, and their dependencies was subsequently transferred into the colony of the Malayan Union, while Singapore was turned into its own Crown Colony. This new political-geographical division of Singapore and (to-be) Malaysia[[1]](#footnote-1) was attributable to an increased importance of Malaya within the British Empire and to the United Kingdom. The impending independence of India resulted in a heightened importance of Malaya and Brunei as the sole colonies between Africa and Hong Kong. India and Pakistan’s independence also left Malaya as the sole major producer of tin and rubber within the Empire. These commodities were important not merely for reasons of self-sufficiency, but as a source of raw resources for the factories of the metropolitan United Kingdom. These resources were also critical sources of exports to prop up the flailing Sterling Area. (A. J. Stockwell, 1999) Singapore “was expected to become “a sort of District of Columbia”, the headquarters of the British Governor-General for Southeast Asia, with its own local government.” (Turnbull, 2009, p. 228) Singapore was also held due to its military importance in a region of great power rivalry. Although the re-organisation of British Malaya took Singaporeans were taken by surprise, Singaporeans were either apathetic or disempowered to resist the *fait accompli*. The British did not oppose a future union between Singapore and Malaysia. Nevertheless, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce echoed most objections by arguing Singapore is “the centre of Malayan economy, politics, and culture”. (Turnbull, 2009, p. 233)

By 1955, however, Singaporean politics have diverged from that of mainland politics. Race is a primary motivation for this divergence. Whereas Singapore is majority Ethnic Chinese, mainland Malaysia was not. Malay nationalists quickly seized the political initiative to argue against the enfranchisement of races which they considered alien. This was specifically targeted against ethnic Chinese, many of whom immigrated to Malaya during their lifetimes. It was feared that democratic enfranchisement – granting one-person-one-vote – will result in a dilution of Malay votes and Malay interests. Constitutionally, the pre-eminent Malay Nationalist political party was the United Malays National Organisation. They argued that as British rule in Malaya was based upon the consent on Malayan sultans, it was unconstitutional for Britain to impose democracy and enfranchise aliens. Another common refrain was a paranoia of Chinese economic domination. Chinese communities in Malaya, were primarily based in cities, where economic wealth is concentrated. Cities also allowed Chinese communities to access to the institutions of British colonial government for economic advantage – Opium monopolies, for example, were a considerable source of income for Chinese tycoons during the first decades of British rule. Cities also allowed Chinese communities to tap unto regional and international kinship networks for money, access, and opportunities.

At any rate, growing xenophobia within Malaya forestalled attempts by the British to re-integrate Singapore into the Malayan Union. Singapore was majority Chinese and dominated by Chinese money. The inclusion of Singapore within Malaya will result in an overall Chinese majority within the resulting union. If democracy was perused alongside merger, a corollary will be that Malays will become political, economic, and demographical minorities within their own country. This was unacceptable to UMNO. (Hirschman, 1986; Sopiee, 1973)

In Singapore, however, every political party which contested in the 1955 elections advocated for a re-unification with Malaya. I found no evidence of any politicians campaigning on a platform of non-Malayan independence. It was taken as a given.

## The British Interest

C. M. Turnbull’s venerable *Modern History of Singapore* (Turnbull, 2009) provides a condensed one-and-a-half chapter overview of historical and political trends during the relevant period. In this work, the Elections of 1955 are depicted as a bridge between two eras of Singaporean history. It was, firstly, the culmination of a decade long project of nation-building and education in self-governance by the British colonial administration. This nation-building project was carried out in the context of post-1) war economic recovery, 2) the advent of ethno-nationalism amongst Malay, Indian, and Chinese communities in British Southeast Asia, and 3) the ascendency and subsequent insurgency of the Malaya Communist Party. (Turnbull, 2009)

By 1955, it was increasingly clear that the age of “High Imperialism” by European Empires was in its death spasms. The British and Portuguese were the only colonial power with holdings in Southeast Asia. The French was routed at Dien Bien Phu, while the Dutch were unable to stomach the political and military costs of war with newly-founded Indonesia. Internationally, the two ascendant superpowers of the United States and Soviet Union were ardent anti-imperialists. Notably, the United States and Soviet Union worked together during the Suez War against the imperialist ambitions of the United Kingdom and France.

The general British approach to anti-colonialist movements, however, was to accommodate them. The British hoped that their former empire may be “an entirely new conception – built on the highest qualities of the Spirit of Man: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace.” In other words, a Commonwealth of countries with a shared culture through which the United Kingdom can exert international influence. Stockwell observes:

Britain prepared to withdraw from empire and relinquish power to new nation-states, not because of sentiment or altruism, but in order to shed costly overseas commitments, safeguard interests in former colonies, enhance influence with current allies and contain communism… Partly evolutionary and partly instrumental, nation-building went hand-in-hand with decolonization. It was assumed that the building-blocks of economic development, social welfare and the “localization” of public services would be laid layer by layer. Upon these would be constructed institutions designed to foster both democratic self-government and social responsibility at local and later central levels. Constitutional engineering would be completed by the topping-out ceremony marking the transfer of power. (T. Stockwell, 2005, p. 196)

This was reflected in the concerns of the Rendell Commission, which gave Singapore its first constitution with local self-government. The Commission observed that:

“Moreover, apart from major difficulties arising out of the present disturbed and dangerous world situation, we consider that the prospects of stable administration would be prejudiced if complete self-govenrment were to be granted before the necessary political experience had been acquired. We believe that apart from these considerations, too hurried an emancipation would merely offer an opportunity to Communist and other disruptive elements to infiltrate into the government and the administration, and to attempt to bring about a state of disorder and insecurity aimed at bringing Singapore under Communist dictatorship.

We therefore consider that there should a be a transition period during which autonomous institutions and political experience can be developed… At the same time we are anxious to make sure the degree of political responsibility and initiative which we are recommending as an important towards self-government is a reality.” (Rendel, 1954, p. 4)

# Narratives Within the Election

## The First-Past-The-Post Problem

Although the left-wing Labour Front came to dominate the 1955 election, they only won a combined vote share of 21.52%. 83 candidates ran for 25 elected seats; without a legacy of strategic voting, voters with common interests often split their vote between two parties of similar political depositions. We can quantify the Misrepresentation Error of the results through the Gallagher Index, which “measures an electoral system’s relative disproportionality between votes received and seats allotted in a legislature.” The Gallagher Index is, simply put, the square root of the total sum of squares of every party’s misrepresentation error. (Gallagher, 1991)

Singapore’s 1955 election has a Gallagher Index of 20.79. That is extraordinarily high.

Figure 1: Gallagher Index of Selected Elections.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Election | Gallagher Index |
| Singapore Parliamentary 1955 | **20.79** |
| Singapore Parliamentary 2016 | 17.74 |
| UK Parliamentary 2017 | 6.47 |
| US Presidential 2016 | 5.25 |
| Malaysia Parliamentary 2018 | 8.63 |
| Taiwan Presidential 2016 | 11.72 |
| Indonesia Parliamentary 2014 | 2.79 |

The Progressive and Democratic Parties, two right-wing political parties, won 53.16% of the total vote, but only 24% of seats in the Legislative Assembly. Combined, however, they only won 6 of the 25 seats up for grabs in 1955.

Figure 2: Misrepresentation Error in Singapore’s 1955 Elections

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Party | Total Votes | Vote Share | Deserved Seats | Actual Seats | Share of Total Seats Won | Misrepresentation Error |
|  | **from data** | **from data** | **vote\_share \* total\_seats** | **from data** | **Actual seats / 25** | **Share of Seats Won - Vote Share** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  | **Positive = Overrepresented** |
| Progressive | 38695 | 27.85% | 7.0 | 4 | 16% | -11.85% |
| Democratic | 32115 | 25.32% | 6.3 | 2 | 8% | -17.32% |
| Labour Front | 42300 | 21.52% | 5.4 | 10 | 40% | 18.48% |
| Independent | 15098 | 12.66% | 3.2 | 3 | 12% | -0.66% |
| Alliance | 13157 | 6.33% | 1.6 | 3 | 12% | 5.67% |
| PAP | 13634 | 5.06% | 1.3 | 3 | 12% | 6.94% |
| Labour Party | 1325 | 1.27% | 0.3 | 0 | 0% | -1.27% |
| SUM | 156324 | 100.00% | 25.0 | 25 | 1 | 1 |

This maldistribution was made worse by the Rendel Constitution’s provision of seven unelected seats. Three were held by British civil servants by virtue by their positions in the civil service (“*Ex-officio* seats”). Four seats were to be nominated by the Governor with the approval of the legislature to represent “minority interests” – that is, ethnic minorities who are too small in number and too geographically spread out to carry an electoral division, and business elites from the Chinese and Indian Chambers of Commerce which had traditionally been close associates of the British colonial bureaucracy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The net result of these convoluted electoral rules is a pre-election pledge by Governor John Nicoll to use the “Queen’s Party” (the derogatory term to describe unelected seats) to prop up whichever party won the most votes. (Turnbull, 2009, p. 260) Nevertheless, this meant the Labour Front only held 10 of the 32 total seats in the Legislative Assembly. That number increases to 13 with the three *ex-officio* members backing the government – still insufficient for a majority. David Marshall, the leader of the Labour Front, tried to convince the Governor to give all four nominated seats to Labour Front Cadres. The Governor refused, only offering two nominated seats to the Labour Front on the condition that Labour Front enters a coalition government with the right-wing Alliance Party. From the British point-of-view, this compromise avoided the worst possible outcome: one where the radically far-left People’s Action Party enter government as a minority party in a coalition. The negative, however, was that Lee Kuan Yew became Singapore’s first Leader of the Opposition. Lee would use this privileged position to promote himself, criticise Marshall, and outmanoeuvre the Labour Front government. (Turnbull, 2009, p. 260)

The net result was a deeply divided three-party coalition government. Modern scholars generally praise/criticise the British Westminster electoral system on the grounds that it creates abnormally strong political parties which, by virtue of their parliamentary majority, have little check and balances. (e.g. Pinto‐Duschinsky, 1999) The Rendel Commission was, in 1955, cognisant of these problems; but they argued for the British constitutional system as it help nurture strong political parties. (Rendel, 1954, p. 16)

The results of the election, then, was abhorrent to the intended ideals of the system. The 1955 elections gave Singapore political parties with little internal accountability, but not the strong majority government that comes with the Westminster system. Singapore did, however, at least for a little while, had a robust and vociferous opposition party in the People’s Action Party.

Singapore basically experienced Brexit before the United Kingdom.

## The Rural-Urban Question

Historically, these important questions of boundary drawing were determined by the organic evolution of geography and electoral institutions over hundreds of years. Singapore, however, do not have a long history of democracy. Neither do we enjoy a deep culture of democratic interaction. The Boundaries Committee needed to draw boundaries in a way which is conducive to the development of political communities where people discussed and debated issues of collective importance. The Boundaries Commission wanted to preserve the natural centres of communities to the best of their ability. So, they took a rather novel approach:

We tried to look at our proposed divisions through the eyes of the elector and the candidate. The elector should see clearly why he is in one division rather than in another; lines of demarcation, therefore, must be easy to follow. The area should not be bigger than the elector would travel normally and with ease. He must see that he has a common interest with his fellow electors. From the point of view of the candidate, the division must not be too large in number or diverse in interest for him to canvass his electors, or care for his constituents, once elected. He is concerned with the roads and with centres where he can hold meetings. (Government of Singapore, 1954, p. 4)

Singapore was not yet a city-state in 1955. Outside the city, many Singaporeans still lived in many small rural settlements which dotted the countryside. The Rendel Report feared that rural dwellers, outnumbered by their urban counterparts, will be drowned out in a sea of urban concerns and voters. Rural Singapore was exceptionally diverse.

* In the Southern Islands, the primary mode of day-to-day transport was boat.
* Woodlands was named after the rubber plantations located there.
* There are rice paddies where the Lorong Chuan MRT station is located today.
* Towns like Bukit Panjang and Nee Soon were bustling market towns with populations of over 4,000 people.
* Some towns were built around keystone industries: Sembawang, for example, was build around Sembawang naval base.

The Boundaries Committee argued that if rural constituencies have as many people as urban constituencies, “the area would be so large that the feeling of community of interest would be dangerously diluted and even the most conscientious candidate would find it difficult to give the constituents the service they have a right to expect.” Thus, they created a malapportioned electoral system where rural voters have a much higher relative voting power.

Figure 3: Constituency Type Malapportionment

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Constituency Type** | **Total Voters** | **Voters per Constituency** | **No. of Constituencies** |
| Urban | 669,599 | 55,800 | 12 |
| Mixed | 187,700 | 37,400 | 5 |
| Rural | 257,500 | 32,200 | 8 |

## The Progressive Party: Not progressive enough

The Singapore Progressive Party was, before the 1955 elections, the largest and most established political party in Singapore. Happy to associate themselves with the Colonial regime, the Progressives were willing to defer to the British on most the issue of Merdeka. Independence is inevitable, but Singapore's independence process must proceed in a slow but orderly fashion. Economic growth and jobs are at stake. The leaders of the Progressive Party were cut from the class of commercial and professional men who flourished under the colonial regime and included a considerable number of white British nationals.

The Progressive Party generally leaned leftwards on social issues, playing leading roles in setting up the Central Providence Fund (CPF) and Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT, later HDB) . The progressive party, however, differed from other socially liberal parties in their approach to independence. The Progressives were in favour of working with the British in a slow-but-steady process of decolonisation.

The Progressives experienced considerable electoral victories during the first half of the 1950s, partly because franchise was only extended to British citizens and British protected persons[[3]](#footnote-3) - groups naturally inclined against an independence which is too hasty. Membership in the party’s early years were restricted to such persons. Leaders from the Progressive Party were members of the Rendel Commission; their party ideologies were thus closely aligned with the resulting Rendel constitution. The party failed to appreciate the need to turn itself into a mass organisation, and thus did not establish links with labour unions before the 1955 election. This, combined with the introduction of automatic voter registration and vote splitting with the Democratic Party, spelled disaster for the Progressives.

In 1955, the Progressives won three of their four Legislative Assembly seats in the Mixed, home to the white-collar dominated suburbs like Serangoon Gardens. The party will limp on for a couple more years, before disappearing into the annals of history.

## The Rise of the Left

In urban electoral divisions, Left-wing parties ran the table. David Marshall's Labour Front won the most seats of any party, winning 10 of the 12 seats in the Urban Area. The Labour Front did contest 7 other non-Urban electoral divisions but only won in one of them. But it did not matter; as the party with the most seats, the Labour Front was able to form Singapore's first elected government.

They did so without the help of non-urban voters. From now on, the only path to political power is through the rowdy mass politics of the urban working class. This new constituency bought with them a new politics - the politics of the Left; of Socialism.

The victory of the Labour Front - a political party formed only just over a year before - shocked everyone.

More established political parties would never regain political prominence. The British allowed elections expecting it would produce a sycophantic government. Instead, they found a fiery champion of Merdeka and social justice in David Marshall.

One urban electoral division not won by the Labour Front was Tanjong Pagar, which was won by Lee Kuan Yew. Tanjong Pagar, located right beside Singapore Harbour, was populated predominantly by dockworkers.

The dockworkers were exceptionally well organised. Their unique work, the physical demands of the work, created a work culture and identity. Labour gangs developed into unions. Historians continue to debate whether the dockworker's union was infiltrated and controlled by the Malayan Communist Party. (Curless, 2017; Turnbull, 2009)

By 1955, however, the Malayan Communist Party has been successfully suppressed by the British colonial administration. A new generation of local labour activists rose to take leadership of Singapore's labour movements. They were anti-colonial nationalists.

The Labour Front did attempt to recruit a young lawyer named Lee Kuan Yew. Lee, however, saw more advantage in siding with people whom historian C. M. Turnbull described as "extreme militant radicals".

The People's Action Party was formed as an alliance between the English-education Lee Kuan Yew and this new generation of labour activists. Lee Kuan Yew cut his teeth in politics as a lawyer representing labour unions. Other PAP leaders like Lim Chin Siong, Jamit Singh, and Fong Swee Suan expected Lee Kuan Yew to play a similar role in the PAP, as an English-speaking spokesman for the far left-wing. Lee Kuan Yew won Tanjong Pagar handily, carrying the electoral division with 78.33% of the vote.

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1. Although there are numerous important events between the 1946 redrawing of borders and the foundation and Singapore’s secession, I will use “to-be Malaysia” as a shorthand for the geographical territories that would eventually become modern Malaysia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is analogous to the situation of Hong Kong, whereby business elites are a reserved constituency in the legislature. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Protected Persons is a status analogous to the modern “British subject” passport held by many persons from Hong Kong. Protected persons status generally entitles holders freedom of travel within the British Empire, and generally had to be inherited or bought. It allowed persons to benefit from British political and economic rights while not pledging allegiance to the British crown. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)