

**A Hint of Pragmatism with a Trace of Authoritarianism: A Historical and Political
Analysis of the TraceTogether Data Scandal**

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In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, governments across the world scrambled to deploy different public health stratagems to combat the spread of the new disease. Digital contact tracing tools, most notably the TraceTogether mobile application developed by the Singaporean government, have been a pioneering method for mitigating the costs and expanding the reach of contact tracing beyond previous manual methods. By requiring the installation of the application for access to key amenities and services, Singapore was able to increase the uptake of TraceTogether to a majority of the population.¹ Despite concerns about the privacy of data used by the TraceTogether application initially being met with promises of data protection and anonymity, on January 4th, government minister Desmond Tan revealed that TraceTogether data was available for use in criminal investigation.² The statement sparked backlash from the population and led to an uncharacteristically thorough apology by the government and legislative amendments to the data used by TraceTogether. This paper will examine the technical aspects of TraceTogether as an application and its origins of TraceTogether through the development of Singapore's political system as dominated by the incumbent People's Action Party. Through analysing the PAP's historical dominance contrasted by its current challenged hegemony via a strengthened electoral opposition, this paper will attempt to use the TraceTogether case to explain the uncharacteristic accountability and transparency of the island city-state.

TraceTogether was launched to the public in March of 2020 after an 8 week development cycle as a complement to the existing regime of manual contact tracing. The application, when installed onto a user's device, exchanges anonymized Bluetooth identifiers and timestamps with other nearby devices while storing the data locally. If a user is diagnosed

¹ Zhilian Huang, Huiling Guo, Hannah Yee-Fen Lim, and Angela Chow, "Awareness, Acceptance, and Adoption of the National Digital Contact Tracing Tool Post Covid-19 Lockdown among Visitors to a Public Hospital in Singapore," *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* 27, no. 7 (January 19, 2021): 1046–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmi.2021.01.007>.

² Matthew Mohan, "Singapore Police Force Can Obtain Tracetogogether Data for Criminal Investigations: Desmond Tan," CNA. Channel News Asia, January 4, 2021.

with COVID-19, contact tracers can access the data and decrypt the identifiers so they can inform those who have been in close contact.³ Other digital contact tracing tools, such as SafeEntry, operate through QR code scanning at public areas such as shopping centres and supermarkets so that information of entry is recorded and the individual can be informed if a case was also in the vicinity at the same time.⁴ All the above applications have their privacy data encrypted and only accessible to public officers, with explicit guidelines of data deletion after a certain time has elapsed: it also is stated that the data may be used for the purposes of criminal investigation.⁵

The effect of TraceTogether, both in the realms of public health and potential concerns for civil liberties, has been discussed across several studies. The effectiveness of a contact tracing app in combating the spread of a pandemic is contingent on the proportion of the population that views it favourably and installs said application. Research done prior to the privacy scandal on the uptake and perceptions of TraceTogether revealed that for cohorts of the population that had a low smartphone penetration and trust in the tool, TraceTogether uptake was low as well.⁶ Researchers also argue that the benefits of adopting digital contact tracing tools in reducing human labour costs and increasing efficiency comes at the price of potential civil liberties. Some posit that contact tracing applications control and limit movement within public spaces by requiring their installation: thus tying them down and producing “docile and compliant bodies.”⁷ Overall, scholarly opinion on TraceTogether and

³ Sean Han Lai, Camelia Qian Tang, Asok Kurup, and Gowreeson Thevendran, “The Experience of Contact Tracing in Singapore in the Control of Covid-19: Highlighting the Use of Digital Technology,” *International Orthopaedics* 45, no. 1 (2020): 65–69.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Are There Data Safeguards in Place When Using Safeentry?” Safe Entry. Team SafeEntry, 2020, <https://support.safeentry.gov.sg/hc/en-us/articles/900000702546-Are-there-data-safeguards-in-place-when-using-SafeEntry->.

⁶ Zhilian Huang, Huiling Guo, Hannah Yee-Fen Lim, and Angela Chow, “Awareness, Acceptance, and Adoption of the National Digital Contact Tracing Tool Post Covid-19 Lockdown among Visitors to a Public Hospital in Singapore,” *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* 27, no. 7 (January 19, 2021): 1046–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmi.2021.01.007>.

⁷ Rob Kitchin, “Civil Liberties or Public Health, or Civil Liberties and Public Health? Using Surveillance Technologies to Tackle the Spread of Covid-19,” *Space and Polity* 24, no. 3 (2020): 362–81.

digital contact tracing tools remains sceptical of the potential drawbacks of implementing such systems without effective protections towards user data privacy: something the Singapore government is less inclined to do thanks to its current political system.

In order to understand the current context of the Singaporean political system, attention needs to be given towards its historical origins from the system under British colonial rule that carried over once it became an independent state. After Singapore was given crown colony status under the British in 1946, the Legislative Council composed of mainly unelected members was formed and eventually opened up to public voting in 1948 for a minority of seats.⁸ This colonial assembly can be seen as the first legislative body to represent Singapore as its own entity, as previously it was grouped as a part of the Straits Settlements that included Malaysia. The British would then allow for the passage of the Rendel Constitution in 1955, reforming the Legislative Council into the Legislative Assembly where a majority of seats would be up for election: mostly done in order to counter the growing independence movements at the time.⁹ More amendments were made to the now-renamed Constitution of Singapore to allow for a fully elected legislature in 1959, precipitating in the first general elections where the People's Action Party were able to secure a majority.¹⁰

Once the PAP was in government, they began to enact several policies and begin operations that would solidify their control over the Singaporean political system for decades to come. The Internal Security Act, previously a British colonial statute enacted to suppress the Malayan Emergency, was applied to Singapore once it joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963 and stipulated that individuals could be detained without trial given that it “[prevented]

⁸ Gabriele Bruns, Aurel Croissant, and Marei John, *Electoral Politics in Southeast & East Asia*, (Singapore: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002), 203.

⁹ Ibid, 204.

¹⁰ Ibid, 205.

that person from acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of Singapore.”¹¹ This provision effectively allowed for the ruling party to detain dissidents without trial or warrant given that a nebulous condition of “national security” was satisfied. In the leadup to the 1963 general elections, the government launched a crackdown on opposition party Barisan Socialis’ leaders, arresting 113 on the grounds that they were Communist agitators.¹² Utilising the colonial-era security legislation, Operation Coldstore was tacitly approved by the British and Malayan governments and was a culmination of the power struggles between Lee Kuan Yew’s PAP and the Barisan Socialis coalition that included leftist splinters that were expelled from his party following the 1961.¹³ Through the crippling of the opposition party organisation through detention and invoking the spectre of a communist takeover of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew’s PAP was able to secure a 2/3 majority in the assembly and quash their opposition at their peak. The PAP would continue to utilise the apparatus of state and legislation to cement their control: it was their government that continued the provision in the Constitution to require a 2/3 legislative majority in Parliament to pass bills for constitutional amendments, effectively excluding any opposition parties control over rewriting the document.¹⁴ The PAP would continue to increase their control and limit potential forms of opposition organisation through government co-option of civil society, ethnic associations, and unions: many of which still hinder the political opposition of Singapore today.¹⁵

It was not until 1981 that the PAP’s monopoly on government was effectively contested; a by-election in the Anson constituency was won by JB Jeyaretnam, head of the opposition Workers’ Party, heralding the first entrance of an opposition member into

¹¹ Parliament of Singapore, *Internal Security Act 1960 (“ISA”)* s. 8(1), Chapter 2, Parliament of Singapore, Singapore: Singapore Statutes Online, 2020, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/ISA1960> (Accessed June 20th).

¹² Goeffe Wade, "Operation Coldstore: A Key Event in the Creation of Modern Singapore" In *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore, Commemorating 50 years* edited by Lysa In Hong; Soo Kai Poh; Kok Fang Tan, Malaysia: Vinlin Press Sdn Bhd, 2013.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Parliament of Singapore, *Constitution of Singapore, Art. 5(2) e*, Parliament of Singapore, Singapore: Singapore Statutes Online, 2020, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963> (Accessed August 2nd).

¹⁵ Christopher Tremewan. *Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 153-56.

Parliament since independence.¹⁶ This was a major setback for the PAP, who sought to recover lost ground by relentlessly assailing Jeyaretnam with libel suits and eventually he was ejected from Parliament in 1986 on grounds of falsely declaring his party's accounts.¹⁷ Jeyaretnam's victory precipitated a shift in the political landscape of Singapore as the PAP begrudgingly made adjustments to create a controlled opposition in Parliament in the wake of his election through the establishment of the Non-constituency Member of Parliament position. An NCMP is a losing candidate of an opposition party that secured the highest percentage of votes who is invited to Parliament in the event that the opposition in government does not reach a certain threshold.¹⁸ While nominally the scheme is in place to ensure the existence of an opposition that can voice their opinions and check the government, NCMPs are unable to vote on substantive matters such as constitutional amendments, no-confidence votes, and budget bills: thus rendering them as a "toothless" opposition. NCMPs are just one of the many ways that the PAP has asserted their control over Singaporean politics without referring to explicitly authoritarian measures. The aforementioned libel lawsuits and charges of illegal assembly that eventually forced JP Jeyaretnam into bankruptcy has been allegedly used as a tool to stifle criticism of the government beyond what the PAP considers acceptable.¹⁹ A combination of control over the levers of elections and government structure, legal challenges towards opposition members that the party deems threatening, and co-optation of the opposition and civil society has enabled the historic dominance of the PAP in the Singaporean political sphere. These methods used to guarantee political stability are a part of a broader trend in Singaporean policy, one that this paper will refer to from this point as "soft authoritarianism."

¹⁶ Tremewan, *Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 157.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 159.

¹⁸ Lim Puay Ling, "Non-Constituency Member of Parliament," Singapore Infopedia, April 3, 2016, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1743_2010-12-24.html.

¹⁹ Tremewan, *Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, 162-3.

Soft authoritarianism has its origins in the colonial histories of Singapore, stemming from legacies of fervent anti-communism and heavy-handed measures after its separation from Malaya, and the mentality of political pragmatism that influences Lee Kuan Yew's PAP even to this day. Operation Coldstore that hamstrung the leftist splinter Barisan Socialis serves as the prime example of this line of reasoning, with Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew being thrust into a "siege mentality" after being ejected from the Malaysian federation also serving as justification for the development of a soft authoritarianism. What is known as political gardening, the act of pruning away dissident elements from society that may challenge the grip of the PAP and perceived stability of the nation, refers to policies that nominally maintain the veneer of an electoral democracy while being managed in a way that retains the real control of power in the hands of the ruling party.²⁰ Without resorting to physical force to subdue a restive opposition, the soft authoritarianism of Singapore moulds the political process and frames elections not as contests between opposing parties but as a consensus measure of the strength of the mandate given to the PAP.²¹

A look at the 1991 government White Paper on Shared Values corroborates this worldview, strongly opposing "venal groups" who would seek power for their own ends and effectively introduce contention into what they believe should be a consensus based process.²² The White Paper reveals many additional things about the PAP: their commitment to a dichotomy of Eastern and Western values and paternalistic language speaking to "Nation before community and society above self" imply a collectivist vision inspired by a Confucian

²⁰ Mohamed Nasir, Kamaludeen, and Bryan S. Turner, "Governing as Gardening: Reflections on Soft Authoritarianism in Singapore," *Citizenship Studies* 17, no. 3-4 (2012): 339-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2012.707005>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Parliament of Singapore, *1991 Government White Paper on Shared Values*, Parliament of Singapore, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 1991, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/docs/a487bfde-7aea-11e7-83df-0050568939ad/Command.1of1991.pdf (Accessed June 17th).

system of ordered hierarchy managed by a benevolent governor.²³ It is unsurprising, then, to see these ideals reflected in the managed democracy of Singapore's political sphere and continues to usher in PAP-led rule. What is surprisingly lacking from the White Paper is the formation of a coherent ideology beyond cultural collectivist rhetoric and support for the ruling party. Such a dearth in guiding ideology is the result of decades of adherence to the doctrine of political pragmatism birthed from the mind of Lee Kuan Yew and integrated into the policymaking of the PAP since.

The political pragmatism of the PAP underlies Singaporean soft authoritarianism and forms the basis for political legitimacy of the party. Through rapid industrialization and state investment into education, Singapore was able to catapult itself into a developed nation: attaining a standard of living among the most developed nations on Earth.²⁴ Despite the initial anxieties about Singapore's welfare following the separation from Malaysia, it was the PAP that can claim credit for what can only be described as an economic miracle for an island city-state lacking its own natural resources, educated labour force, and land. According to the party, it was state-level policies of top-down micromanagement of society that was crucial to Singapore's current affluent status.²⁵ The PAP often deflects criticism of its nebulous lack of ideology by accounting it to being in touch with the population and their "bread and butter" issues. Much of this adherence to pragmatism can be explained through Lee Kuan Yew's perspective on the practice itself,

²³ J R Clammer "Deconstructing Values: The Establishment of a National Ideology and Its Implications for Singapore's Political Future," In *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*, edited by Garry Rodan, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 35–49.

²⁴ World Bank, "Singapore Overview," The World Bank, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/singapore/overview>.

²⁵ Lee Kuan Yew, "National Day Rally 1986." August 9th, 1986. Kallang Theatre, Singapore, MP4, 3:46, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/audiovisual_records/record-details/48aabfb1-1164-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad.

“The system works regardless of your race, language or religion because otherwise we'd have divisions. We are pragmatists. We don't stick to any ideology. Does it work? Let's try it and if it does work, fine, let's continue it. If it doesn't work, toss it out, try another one. We are not enamoured with any ideology.”²⁶

Despite the seemingly sensible rhetoric contained within the excerpt, what “works” has remains a criterion that the ruling party controls the definition on. Much of the PAP’s electoral strategy for maintaining voter support has revolved around heralding back to previous performances as an example of why the PAP is competent and unclouded by ideology.²⁷ This performance legitimacy is often combined with fears of crisis to attempt to convince voters that the PAP ticket is the rational, stable, and reasonable option to ensure Singapore’s prosperity.²⁸ While in the past this method has proven successful in bringing in strong mandates for the party, recent general election results in 2011 and 2020 have been less than desirable for the incumbent PAP; incidentally these elections were following two of the worst crises that Singapore has faced since independence — the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The two recent “crisis elections” in 2011 and 2020 signalled a monumental shift in Singaporean politics with opposition parties attaining unprecedented results and bringing the PAP to their lowest vote shares since independence. While a comfortable majority of votes in Parliament still rests with the incumbent party, the opposition’s victory signals a shift in the voting public’s preferences and leads us to question how exactly this change came about.

²⁶ International Herald Tribune, “Excerpts from an Interview with Lee Kuan Yew,” *New York Times (Online)*, 29 Aug. 2007.

²⁷ Bilveer Singh, Felix Thiam Kim Tan, and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah. “Explaining the Singapore 2020 General Election Results” In *Unmasking Singapore’s 2020 General Elections: COVID-19 and the Evolving Political Landscape*, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2021), 93-132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Analyses of the 2020 General Election in particular are important in the context of this paper: the government's handling of the coronavirus, shifting attitudes about previously sidelined issues of race and sexuality, and voter perceptions of PAP credibility all were factors that led to a weaker governing mandate for the ruling party.²⁹ The “venal” opposition parties of the past have now moved towards mobilising voters on their own party credibility and fashioning their platform as a check on the government: essentially renouncing their desire to form a separate government and nullifying the PAP tactic of painting the opposition as a potential threat to stability.³⁰ What matters most from GE2020 isn't how these results came to be, but the implications they carry for the PAP's behaviour given their poorer than expected electoral performance.

The PAP's uncharacteristic backtracking and extensive apology in the wake of the TraceTogether data exposure incident exposes the degree to which it feels threatened in the electoral realm post-GE2020. TraceTogether can be seen as a reflection of the Singapore government's continued strategy of pragmatism in policy that takes precedence over concerns of civil liberties, privacy, and other issues that would hold weight in other political systems. Oftentimes this leads to the soft authoritarianism that has been described earlier in the paper with roots in the formation of the Singaporean political system where opposition candidates were imprisoned, silenced, and sued to capitulation. For policies like the Protection From Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) that places limits on online speech, legislation in Singapore under the PAP has brought its share of accusations of potential misuse for political purposes.³¹ The opposition political figure Alex Tan, who was the editor of the now-defunct Temasek Review and The Real Singapore, is the single-most targeted

²⁹ Singh et al, *Unmasking Singapore's 2020 General Elections*, 93-132.

³⁰ Steven Oliver and Kai Ostwald, “Singapore's Pandemic Election: Opposition Parties and Valence Politics in GE2020,” *Pacific Affairs* 93, no. 4 (2020): 759–80, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2020934759>.

³¹ Jonathan Kung and Elise Jonas-Delson, “Singapore Fake News Law: For or Against Democracy?” *Democratic Erosion*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/05/27/singapores-fake-news-law-for-or-against-democracy/>.

individual of POFMA corrections.³² Yet when the government admitted that their government was using TraceTogether data for police investigations, contrary to previous assurances that it would only be used for contact tracing, the administration took an uncharacteristically in-depth approach to apologising and rectifying their mistake. Vivian Balakrishnan, the government minister in charge of the Smart Nation Initiative that created TraceTogether, issued a public apology in a speech in Parliament proposing an amendment to clearly limit the government's ability to use the application's data to specific sets of serious criminal cases;³³ "serious offences" being defined to include terrorism, firearms, murder, drug offenses, kidnapping, and rape.³⁴ The extent to which the incumbent party went to rectify their mistake and save face is a reflection of the PAP's current weak mandate to govern. The party fears that their credibility, after already being undermined by the unsatisfactory handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, will be further tarnished and lead to increasing opposition strength in elections that have historically been a foregone conclusion. It is a sign that the PAP believes that Singaporean voters are no longer convinced by the appeal to historical economic success and are demanding increased accountability. In a twist of expectations, the soft authoritarian system of Singaporean politics that has historically silenced dissent and remained largely unaccountable to its voting population has responded to a government blunder in a way which typical liberal democracies would be expected to do so.

This paper has examined the TraceTogether as a contact-tracing tool developed under the ideology of pragmatism that can be traced through the development of Singapore's political history from the colonial era to the present. The People's Action Party's tactics of

³² Teo Kai Xiang, "POFMA: How Is Singapore Using Its Anti Fake News Law?" Singapore Samizdat, Singapore Samizdat, July 1, 2022, <https://www.singapore-samizdat.com/pofma-anti-fake-news-law/>.

³³ Hermes Auto, "Vivian Balakrishnan Says He 'Deeply Regrets' Mistake on Tracetgether Data," The Straits Times, February 2, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/vivian-balakrishnan-says-he-deeply-regrets-mistake-on-tracetgether-data-first-realised-it>.

³⁴ Parliament of Singapore. *COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act 2020*, Seventh Schedule. Parliament of Singapore. Singapore: Singapore Statutes Online, 2020, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/COVID19TMA2020?ValidDate=20220909&TransactionDate=20220909&ProvIds=Sc7-#Sc7-> (Accessed August 10th)..

securing power in the nascent Singaporean political sphere post-independence through rule by law, silencing of opponents, and state micromanagement of society has established a lasting legacy of soft authoritarian politics cemented under a foundation of performance legitimacy. In analysing the PAP's lacklustre performances in GE2020 thanks to factors such as loss of government credibility and shifting voter preferences, this paper has presented the argument that the government's response to the TraceTogether data leak incident represented a backtracking measure to save face and avoid yet another dip in the incumbent party's voter confidence. In spite of over half a century of control over the levers of power, the People's Action Party held themselves accountable to a population for fear of ceding more electoral ground to the opposition. What remains to be seen are if the party's apprehensions over a growing opposition platform are warranted, and if the next generation of party leaders can successfully navigate a new transition period during what may be the beginnings of genuine political opposition in Singapore since independence.

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