



**A Buzz in Cyberspace,
But No Net-Revolution**
The Role of the Internet in
Singapore's 2011 Elections

By Kai Portmann
2011

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Abstract

The May 2011 general election has been the most contested and most discussed in Singapore's history. Prior to the polls, the government relaxed the rules on election campaigning in the Internet. For the first time in the highly wired city-state with its tech-savvy population of 5 million people, opposition parties had the chance to mobilize supporters via social-networking media like Facebook and Twitter. Bloggers used cyberspace extensively for political debate and comment.

While the ever-ruling People's Action Party (PAP) posted its worst result in decades, the opposition gained historical victories, at least by Singapore standards. Observers were quick to label the polls as an "Internet election," implying that media activism in the city-state's cyberspace had a decisive impact on the ballot.

A more measured reading of the election outcome, however, suggests that the polls were not decided in Singapore's web. The voters' choice was largely influenced by bread-and-butter issues as well as a call for divergent voices in politics and more control of the government.

Although online political expression since the mid-1990s has challenged the PAP's authoritarian rule and has changed Singapore's political culture, its impact in electoral terms has so far been limited. The PAP still keeps the city-state tightly under control, online and offline, and is likely to continue its dominance in the foreseeable future. It remains to be seen if Internet media activism can push the city-state towards an open democracy.

Retrospect: *The Origins of the PAP's authoritarian style*

The PAP's brand of authoritarian government harks back to Singapore's turbulent history in the past seven decades. The party has ruled Singapore ever since 1959. Its way to power was shaped by the politics of the British colonialists after World War II.

Post-war Singapore was still of vital commercial and strategic interest for the British. Therefore, Britain was hesitant to let Singapore gain independence quickly. Furthermore, after the 1949 victory of Mao Zedong's communists over Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government in China and with tensions growing between the Soviet Union and the Western countries, the British feared that without its control Singapore would easily become an outpost of communism and "a springboard to subvert Western interests in Malaya, Indonesia and elsewhere in South-East Asia."¹

The British maintained their colonial rule until 1955, when they introduced a new constitution, which allowed limited self-government by elected representatives. Founded in 1954, with English-educated lawyer Lee Kuan Yew as a key player, the PAP won three of four seats it contested in the 1955 election. Just four years later, the party gained a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly, winning 43 out of 51 contested seats. At the age of 36, Lee became Singapore's first prime minister.

The PAP rulers tackled the tough challenges of improving people's lives and solving Singapore's economic and social problems, promoting the creation of jobs and providing low-cost, high-rise housing.

1 Church 2006, p. 149.

In addition, the PAP faced battles within the party between Lee and the moderate wing on one side and leftist labor leaders and communists on the other.² Lee and his followers eventually held the upper hand. In 1961, the two factions of the PAP split. Dissidents from the PAP's left wing formed a new party, the Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front).

The hard-fought victory over its rivals shaped the PAP leaders' attitude towards divergent opinions and their style of government, as it "left the PAP government with a deep intolerance for left-wing political opposition and social organizations which did not see eye-to-eye with the PAP policies."³

Another crucial moment for Singapore came with Britain's decision to end its rule in the early 1960s. The British pushed for the creation of Malaysia, a new state comprising Malaya, Singapore and the North Borneo territories Sabah and Sarawak. For Singapore, the solution made sense, given its strong economic ties with Malaya.

The PAP, which supported the merger, in September 1962 called a referendum on Singapore's entry to Malaysia in which voters could make a choice about the terms of the merger, but could not oppose it. The Barisan Sosialis urged voters to protest against the referendum. The PAP, however, won 70 per cent of the votes.⁴

The PAP seized the opportunity to strike a decisive blow against its leftist rivals. In February 1963 it launched a police action code-named "Operation Coldstore". More than 100 anti-government unionists, Barisan leaders and "communist sympathizers" were arrested under the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial, for supposedly planning to destabilize the country.⁵

Malaysia was formed in September 1963. Just two years later, in August 1965,

2 See: Baker 2008, p. 274: "The party was an odd alliance of noncommunist, English-educated professionals on the one side and left-leaning trade unionists and Chinese chauvinists [...] on the other. In many ways the two groups planned to use each other to gain political power. They had the common goal of freeing Singapore from colonial rule and creating a more equitable society, but each knew that once the party attained power, one faction or the other would have to be destroyed because they disagreed over too much else."

3 Pakiam 2007, p. 2; see also Rodan 1998.

4 See Baker 2008, p. 296.

5 Ibid., p. 297. For details and a critical view on the ISA see: http://agc.vldb4.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-143 , <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160101.pdf>

Singapore was expelled from the federation and became the independent Republic of Singapore. Officially, the parting was a mutual decision; actually Singapore was kicked out because the Malays feared that the PAP and the ethnic Chinese in Malaya would strive to dominate the federation's politics.

For Lee Kuan Yew, who had fought for Singapore's merger with Malaya, the separation was a huge blow as "Singapore had independence thrust upon it."⁶ It was conventional wisdom that the tiny island state, lacking natural resources and surrounded by much bigger neighbors with anti-Chinese sentiments, "was simply not viable."⁷ But following the traumatic separation, Lee and his PAP beat the odds and managed to develop Singapore into an economic powerhouse.

Their success, however, relied on an authoritarian rule featuring "a sophisticated and systematic combination of legal limits and political activities on the one hand, and extensive mechanisms of political co-option to channel contention through state-controlled institutions on the other."⁸

Based on the view that Singapore was "a society fighting for survival in a hostile world" and needed unity and stability to exist, the PAP drafted a social contract which guaranteed the Singapore people prosperity and a good quality of life, while limiting their individual rights and civil liberties.⁹ Over decades, Singaporeans accepted this trade-off, which included a "suppression of a genuine civil society."¹⁰

6 Lee Kuan Yew 1998, p. 22.

7 Ibid.

8 Rodan 1998. The US State Department in its latest human rights report on Singapore said: "The government has broad powers to limit citizens' rights and handicap political opposition, which it used. [...] The following human rights problems also were reported: preventive detention, infringement of citizens' privacy rights, restriction of speech and press freedom and the practice of self-censorship by journalists, restriction of freedoms of assembly and association, some limited restriction of freedom of religion, and some trafficking in persons." See: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160101.pdf>

9 Baker 2008, p. 348.

10 Rodan 1998.

Limited Space: *A stunted civil society in a de-facto one-party state*

After coming to power in the parliamentary republic, the PAP monopolized politics and managed to control almost all aspects of life. The Singapore state became increasingly depoliticized and bureaucratic, based on a centralized structure with a comprehensive network of overlaps between the PAP, government and state institutions.¹¹

An election system that favors the ruling party has guaranteed the PAP's dominance in all ballots since 1959 and given it an overpowering majority in the unicameral parliament, making Singapore practically a one-party nation.¹²

Opposition politicians regarded as a threat to the PAP, like the late J.B. Jeyaretnam, were repeatedly sued for defamation and thus forced into bankruptcy and political inactivity.¹³

On the part of the ruled, Singaporeans were happy with the model as long as it provided for security and prosperity. It was Singapore's economic success which brought some changes in the 1980s. A growing middle class called for more openness in society, while widening income gaps showed fractures in the city-state's society. Unhappiness with some PAP policies grew. As a result, the PAP suffered a blow in the 1984 general election as the party's percentage of electorate dropped to 62.5 per cent, down from 75 per cent in the 1980 polls. The opposition broke the PAP's monopoly in parliament, winning two of 79 seats. The downward trend for the PAP continued during the 1990s.¹⁴

The PAP reacted with some adjustments in the political game and installed feedback channels to absorb critical voices, but made sure "that the government and its policies could proceed without serious challenge."¹⁵

11 See: Ho Khai Leong 2010, p.70.

12 See Fetzter 2008. For a critical view on Singapore's election system see also: http://aceproject.org/ace-es/topics/bd/bdy/bdy_sg/?searchterm=singapore%20drawing%20districts

13 On J.B. Jeyaretnam see, for example: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A0CE1D8123EF936A35753C1A96E9C8B63> or <http://www.economist.com/node/12376738>

14 For election results see: http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html

15 Baker 2008, p. 373.

The public was encouraged to take more responsibility and to engage in social welfare activities and voluntary actions. However, the government made clear that social and religious organizations had to stay out of politics and that its competence and authority could not be questioned.¹⁶

Currently, there are several thousand civil society organizations registered in Singapore, but the vast majority is affiliated with the government or supports the authorities. For the PAP, civil society organizations are an extension of the state and “junior partners” in developing Singapore.¹⁷ Only a small number can be regarded as non-governmental or in resistance to government policies.¹⁸

Since the 1990s, a uniquely Singaporean feature of defining the rules for public debate and discourse is the setting of informal, soft guidelines, labeled by the government as “out of bound markers” or “OB markers,” a term referring to an area of a golf course where playing is not allowed. The concept is highly ambiguous, and the government has made it clear that this vagueness was intentional. In a landmark speech on civil society, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2004 said that clarifying the rules “would have been difficult in practice, and probably would not have been desirable in principle” as it limited the space for civil society to act. He argued that had the government predefined all parameters of discussion, “civil society would have lost the spark and autonomy that allows fresh areas to be explored [and] limits to be redefined.”¹⁹

Singapore’s rulers have repeatedly used OB markers to set boundaries. In 1994 best-selling fiction author and political commentator Catherine Lim argued – in two opinion pieces published by the Straits Times – that Singaporeans respect their government for its effective job but don’t really like their leaders, and she criticized a large salary rise for government officials.²⁰ Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong strongly rebutted Lim’s comments and defined the OB marker that “if a person wants to set the agenda for Singapore by commenting regularly on politics, [...] the person should do this in the political arena.”²¹

In 2006, popular blogger mrbrown, whose real name is Lee Kin Mun, published a column in *Today* newspaper on the rising costs of living and Singaporeans’

16 Lee Hsien Loong 2004; Baker 2008, p. 375.

17 Gillian Koh used this expression at a FES seminar in Singapore on November 10, 2011.

18 For an overview and analysis see Koh, Gillian/Soon, Debbie 2011.

19 Lee Hsien Loong 2004; see also Tan, Tarn How/Mahizhnan, Arun 2008

20 Lim, Catherine 2011, p. 115-140; see also Baker, Jim 2008, p. 414.

21 Lee, Terence 2002, p. 109.

difficulties in making ends meet.²² The column provoked another stern reaction from the government. In an open letter to *Today* it declared mrbrown “a partisan player in politics” and had the column removed from the newspaper.²³

Over the years, the PAP government has set clear rules for the citizen’s engagement with the authorities, namely: politics has to be treated with seriousness; politicians have to be treated with respect; and citizens who engage in politics should join political parties.²⁴

For Terence Lee, an academic from Murdoch University, Western Australia, “the Singaporean idea of civil society is an excellent example of gestural politics.” While the PAP government, on the one hand, encourages its people to become active citizens, however, on the other hand it issues “stern warnings [...] at regular intervals to remind people of the existence of OB-markers and other state-defined conditions.”²⁵

In another move to regulate public political expression, in 2009 the government tightened Singapore’s already strict assembly law, the Public Order Act, prior to the November summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in the city-state.²⁶ Earlier that year, the summit of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Thailand had been cancelled due to public protests. Against that background the government asserted that “Singapore cannot afford to have this meeting disrupted.”²⁷ The new law allowed police to order a person to leave an area if they determined he was about to break the law and it required a police permit for all cause-related activities, no matter how many people were involved. Opposition parties claimed that “the Bill as a whole will give the State a carte blanche to control citizen activity and further erode whatever little power Singaporeans have to pursue legitimate causes.”²⁸

22 Retrieved from mrbrown.com, November 12, 2011: http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/2006/07/today_sporeans_.html

23 Retrieved from mrbrown.com, November 12, 2011: http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/2006/07/letter_from_mic.html

24 Tan, Tarn How/Mahizhnan, Anan 2008, p. 3.

25 Lee, Terence 2002, p. 110. Lee argues that the opening of a Speakers’ Corner in Singapore’s Hong Lim Park in September 2000 was a typical example of such gestural politics, given the strict regulations and cryptic OB markers for giving speeches or holding rallies at the park.

26 See: http://agcvldb4.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_legdisp.pl?actno=2009-ACT-15-N

27 Retrieved from Aseanaffairs.com, November 12, 2011: http://www.aseanaffairs.com/singapore_tightens_public_assembly_law_ahead_of_apec_summit

28 Retrieved from the Workers’ Party website, November 12, 2011: <http://wp.sg/2009/04/public-order-bill/> ; for the bill see: http://agcvldb4.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_legdisp.pl?actno=2009-ACT-15-N

For Kenneth Paul Tan, associate professor at Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, the PAP rulers successfully managed "to activate the people in a civil society that it has endeavored to depoliticize at the same time."²⁹

Spurred by a variety of channels for information and discussion in the Internet, in the last decade a younger and better educated citizenry has grown up in Singapore. This group puts increasing pressure on the PAP rulers to allow for more participation and openness in the political process.

Observers have noted that the government "must accept the fact that it is no longer the only agent that may set the terms of debate as public discourse finds avenues on the Internet."³⁰

However, Singapore's civil society currently is still underdeveloped, and it "is largely a state-sanctioned sphere of engagement that has emerged in response to middle class pressure for greater political liberalization."³¹

The Internet and social media provide opportunities for strengthening Singapore's civil society. But the chances for success depend on the rules set by the PAP.

29 Tan, Kenneth Paul 2010.

30 Russell, Heng Hiang Khng 2010, p. 530.

31 Gomez, James/Lyons LT 2005, p. 2.

The PAP and the Media: *Forceful legislation ensures compliance*

Convinced that Singapore as a small, vulnerable, multi-racial island state needed a strong government and could not afford to speak with divergent voices, the PAP has extended its political monopoly to the media.

Singapore's media industry is dominated by the government-sponsored Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which currently publishes 18 newspaper titles in four languages, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, with the English daily *Straits Times* as its flagship publication.³² The only other daily newspaper in Singapore that does not come from SPH, *Today*, is published by national broadcaster MediaCorp, the government-owned provider of TV and radio programmes.³³

For Singapore's rulers the role of the press is to get their message across. They regard a free press as a threat to national interests and a risk for social order, moral values as well as national security.³⁴

Over decades, the PAP government has made it clear that Singapore's media cannot have the unfettered freedom the press enjoys in Western countries. In an address to the International Press Institute in Helsinki in July 1971, state founder Lee Kuan Yew stressed that Singapore's media had to comply with the government's policies to ensure a stable and prosperous society: "Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government."³⁵ Other Singapore leaders have reiterated this stance on many occasions.³⁶

Even 40 years later, then Law Minister K Shanmugam echoed Lee's argumentation, saying that "our view is that our small society, with a short

32 See: <http://www.sph.com.sg/ourproducts.shtml> See: <http://www.sph.com.sg/ourproducts.shtml>

33 See: <http://www.mediacorp.sg/en/corporate/print>

34 Tan, Tarn How 2010, p. 244, p. 249.

35 Lee Kuan Yew 1971.

36 See, for example: Lee Hsien Loong 2004.

common shared history, enclosed within a small island, cannot withstand the harm that can be caused by giving our media the role that the US media has.”³⁷

The PAP has clashed with the press time and again. From 1963, the government imprisoned the editor of the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, Said Zahari, for 17 years, based on the Internal Security Act (ISA). In 1971, editors and reporters of the Chinese paper *Nanyang Siang Pau* were arrested under the ISA for “glamorizing of the communist way of life” and stirring up “Chinese racial emotions.”³⁸ Also in 1971, the government closed down two English newspapers, the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald*, accusing both of being “‘black operations’ funded by unknown overseas backers.”³⁹

In 1974 the PAP established the Newspaper and Printing Press Act (NPPA), its sharpest sword for ruling in the media landscape.⁴⁰

According to the act, newspapers require a licence that needs to be renewed annually. For newspaper companies, the act also established a two-tier system of “management shares” on the one hand and “ordinary shares” on the other, which gives Singapore’s rulers the power to appoint key office holders. The act “confers on the government additional levers of influence that guarantee control without the need to resort to drastic measures such as shutting down a newspaper.”⁴¹

With amendments to the NPPA in 1986, the PAP government tightened the rules for foreign print media and restricted the distribution for all foreign publications which supposedly interfered with Singapore politics.”⁴²

Backed by a forceful tool like the NPPA as well as other laws – the ISA, the Sedition Act, the Official Secrets Act and strict libel laws - and spurred by its power to choose the most senior editors, the PAP has ensured the compliance of the Singapore print media. Using “behind-the-scenes strings that tie the press to the government,” the PAP leaders “can count on editors to act in the

37 Shanmugam, K 2010.

38 See: journalism.sg, retrieved November 12, 2011, from: [http://presspedia.journalism.sg/doku.php?id=cases:1971&s\[\]=utusan&s\[\]=melayu](http://presspedia.journalism.sg/doku.php?id=cases:1971&s[]=utusan&s[]=melayu)

39 Tan, Tarn How 2010, p. 245.

40 For details see: <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;page=0;query=Compld%3A87a8472b-dd54-401a-b027-11e2bb71e5ca;rec=0>

41 Tan, Tarn How 2010, p. 245.

42 Singapore’s government has repeatedly and successfully sued foreign media for defamation. The list includes the *Herald Tribune* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, among others. See, for example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/opinion/04pubed.html> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/25/business/media/25times.html>

interests of the nation, the state, the government, and the party" without any need for prior censorship.⁴³

According to a diplomatic cable from the United States Embassy Singapore, local journalists are increasingly frustrated with the restrictions on their reporting. Journalists of the *Straits Times* told US diplomats that the government puts immense pressure on the newspaper's editors. One journalist "admitted that reporters practice self-censorship," but added that "self-censorship is not really needed as most censorship is done by the editors."⁴⁴

Advocacy groups for press freedom constantly rank Singapore at the bottom of their lists. In its 2010 press freedom index, Reporters without Borders listed Singapore 136th out of 178 countries, together with Mexico.⁴⁵ Washington-based Freedom House classifies Singapore's press as "not free."⁴⁶

The Singapore government, however, questions the objectivity of such rankings and classifications. It has, therefore, chosen "to ignore the criticisms which make no sense."⁴⁷

Over four decades, the PAP government designed a control system to ensure the compliance of the mainstream media. But the rise of the Internet since the late 1990s brought another challenge for Singapore's rulers. They had to find new ways of control in a changing media landscape while walking a fine line between the economic potential of the Internet and the government's traditional pattern of regulation.

43 George, Cherian 2006, p. 49.

44 United States Embassy Singapore 2009. Shortly after the cable was published, the reporter, Lynn Lee, denied having made the statements, saying the cable "misrepresented" what she said. See: <http://www.facebook.com/notes/lynn-lee/response-to-the-us-embassy-cable-published-on-wikileaks-aug-30-2011/214572988600724>

45 See: <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html>

46 See: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2011>

47 Shanmugam, K 2010.

The PAP and the Internet: *Auto-regulation permits a “light-touch approach”*

The Singapore government has been pushing information technology and the use of computers since the 1980s when the city-state shifted its economic strategy towards high-technology manufacturing and service. A National Computerization Plan (1981-1985) and a National Information Technology Plan (1986-1989) were followed by an IT2000 master plan in 1992, aimed at developing Singapore into an “intelligent island” with a world-class IT network. Originally based on Telview, an interactive videotext system, the Internet soon became the focus of the plan.⁴⁸ The general public gained access to the Internet beginning in July 1994 after state-owned Singapore Telecom launched the country’s first commercial Internet provider, SingNet.⁴⁹

Spurred by further government initiatives, including the establishment of e-government and e-commerce applications, internet penetration in Singapore reached high rates. The World Bank gives the number of Internet users in Singapore with almost 3.66 million for 2009, a penetration rate of 73.3 per cent.⁵⁰

According to Singapore official statistics, in 2010 about 84 per cent of the city state’s households had access to at least one computer at home. 82 per cent of the households had access to Internet and broadband with 69 per cent of citizens saying they had used the Internet in the last 12 months.⁵¹

The number of Facebook users in Singapore is estimated at around 2.6 million, meaning that more than one half of the city state’s population uses the social website. The number of Twitter users is estimated at 900,000.⁵²

Singapore’s rulers are ambivalent about the Internet. The imperative to

48 George, Cherian 2006, p. 66.

49 Ibid., p. 66.

50 See: http://search.worldbank.org/quickview?name=%3Cem%3EInternet%3C%2Fem%3E+users&id=IT.NET.USER&type=Indicators&cube_no=2&qterm=internet+penetration

51 See: http://www.ida.gov.sg/doc/Publications/Publications_Level3/Survey2010/HH2010ES.pdf

52 Lim, Philipp 2011.

embrace the World Wide Web as a key pillar of Singapore's economic strategy challenged the government's obsessive effort to regulate all aspects of society because the means to control cyberspace are limited. But "the internet was irresistibly attractive to policy-makers" and the city-state "could not afford to miss this trend."⁵³

Two years after the government provided its citizens with public access to the World Wide Web, it introduced Internet regulations in July 1996. The rules required Internet content providers to route all their traffic through proxy servers, ensuring that the authorities were able to filter all content they deemed unsuitable.

Then Minister of Information, Communications and the Arts, George Yeo, characterized the Internet as a newly opened frontier, saying, "it is a little like the Wild West." He assured Singaporeans that the government "will regulate only what can be regulated."⁵⁴

Singapore's Media Development Authority (MDA) describes the legal framework for the Internet as "a balanced and light-touch approach to ensure that minimum standards are set for the responsible use of the Internet while offering maximum flexibility for industry players to operate." It encourages "self-regulation" on the side of the provider and the user.⁵⁵

The MDA claims that it does not pre-censor Singapore's Internet and that it is concerned primarily "with pornography, violence and the incitement of racial or religious hatred." As a symbolic statement, the government since 1997 has upheld a ban on 100 websites it regards as objectionable, including pornographic sites and sites which incite racial and religious intolerance and promote extremism.

The government's "light-touch approach" for the Internet is based on a catch-all class licence scheme under which web providers are not bound to apply for a licence, but must register with the MDA. The Broadcasting Act explicitly obligates any content provider who is "a body of persons engaged in the

53 George, Cherian 2010, p. 258.

54 See interview with Yeo in Asia Inc, July 1996. Retrieved November 12, 2011, from: <http://www.salitripathi.com/articlesAsialnc/July96Asialnc.html>

55 All quotes from MDA regulations in the following paragraphs can be found on: <http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/licences/mobj.487.ClassLicence.pdf>; http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/licences/mobj.981.Internet_Code_of_Practice.pdf; <http://www.mda.gov.sg/Public/MediaClassification/Pages/Internet.aspx>

propagation, promotion or discussion of political or religious issues relating to Singapore” to register with the authorities.

In addition, all Internet content providers are bound by the MDA’s Internet Code of Practice, which compels all licensees “to ensure that prohibited material is not broadcast via the Internet to users in Singapore.” Prohibited material is only vaguely specified as “material that is objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore law.”

Despite the legislation’s being open to wide interpretation, it makes the provider responsible and liable for all content on his website. Moreover, in the final clause of the Class Licence scheme all Internet providers are strongly reminded that the online world is subject to all offline laws: “Nothing in this schedule shall exempt the licensee from complying with the requirements of any other written law relating to the provision of the licensee’s service.” Thus, the same legislation which restricts press freedom in the mainstream offline media also limits open discussions in the online media.

Tests by the OpenNet Initiative showed that the Singapore authorities implement only “minimal Internet filtering,” but are relying “mainly on non-technological measures to curb online commentary and content.” Similar to the offline world, “the threats of lawsuits, fines, and criminal prosecution inhibit more open discourse in an otherwise vibrant Internet community.”⁵⁶

Even critical observers of Singapore’s media policy acknowledge that so far the government has exercised considerable self-restraint in controlling the Internet and “largely kept to its word” to regulate with a “light-touch approach.”⁵⁷

Actions against Internet providers “were few and far between,” with the case of independent website Sintercom (Singapore Internet Community), which was shut down by its founder in 2001 following measures by the regulators, being one example.⁵⁸ The authorities “have focused on the selective use of state power against the mobilization and organization of dissent – most of it offline – rather than on cleaning up cyberspace.”⁵⁹

56 OpenNet Initiative 2007, p. 3.

57 George, Cherian 2010, p. 259

58 For details of the Sintercom story see: George, Cherian 2006, p. 99-119; Siew, Alfred 2001.

59 George, Cherian 2010, p. 261.

Another important aspect regarding Singapore's Internet control is that the practice of self-censorship can also be found in the citizens' use of the web. Terence Lee argues that Singapore's style of government resonates with a climate of fear which gives rise to self-censorship.⁶⁰ Singapore's "light-touch approach" in ruling the Internet coupled with other laws led to "auto-regulation" in cyberspace, to "a policy discourse where discipline and control is carried out 'automatically' without the need for direct policing or overt surveillance and supervision."⁶¹

Lee concludes that Singapore's government has perfected the auto-regulation of the Internet, for example, by not letting its citizens know when the authorities are really watching, thus producing a sphere of uncertainty and fear. Supposed scanning scandals in 1994 and 1999, when it came to light that government-controlled telecommunications company SingNet scanned user accounts, made it clear that the authorities had the capability and the facilities to filter the net. The symbolic ban of 100 websites suggests the same. The government brings its citizens to obedience just by making them believe that it was able to control the web, so that "whether or not actual online monitoring is done becomes irrelevant."⁶² All in all, Singapore "appears to embrace technological progress and development, whilst making sure that its regulatory control over technology remains watertight."⁶³

Since the late 1990s, nevertheless, the Internet has become a medium for political activity of various groups in Singapore that test the limits of the rules and try the government's capability to control dissent.

For James Gomez, an academic and founder of Internet forum thinkcentre.org and member of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party, "the online medium has been harnessed by non-political affiliated groups and individuals to provide information about the opposition not available in the local media," as the mainstream media is viewed as being biased against the opposition parties.⁶⁴

60 Lee, Terence 2005, p.74.

61 Ibid, p. 82. Lee compares Singapore with the "Panopticon", a building designed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. From the building, an observer could watch all inmates of a prison while they were not able to tell whether or not they are being watched. French philosopher Michel Foucault discussed the term as a form of government in a surveillance state where discipline and control are carried out automatically in: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Random House, 1977.

62 Lee, Terence 2005, p. 74.

63 Ibid., p. 92.

64 Gomez, James 2006, p. 5. See also: Ibid., p. 8 ff.

Especially during periods preceding elections, when the rulers are extremely sensitive to all issues that have the potential to stir disharmony, the government has always come up with a new set of rules or clarifications to discipline any online political expression.

The Internet in the 1997, 2001 and 2006 elections: *Changing the game, but not the results*

Singapore's first general election after public Internet access was introduced came in 1997, just a year after the government released its regulations for political content in the World Wide Web. The rules were set up after the independent website Sintercom, founded by university student Tan Chong Kee, came into the limelight following a report in the *Straits Times* on the website's role as a political forum.⁶⁵

Created as an Internet space "to let people say 'that's what I think'", during the 1997 polls Sintercom also contained articles on election rallies as well as previous poll results. Tan claimed that he did not aim for political power; he told authorities that he wanted, rather, "to encourage lively debate about Singapore issues."⁶⁶

Singapore's Broadcasting Authority, the predecessor of the MDA, asked Sintercom to register under its new regulations for websites with political content. After Tan pledged to "exercise responsibility, intelligence and maturity in its selection of postings," the authorities stepped back from requiring Sintercom to register, thus allowing "experiments with alternative citizen reporting"⁶⁷ during the 1997 general election.

Singapore's rulers in 1998 went so far as to hail Sintercom, which refrained from a fanatic anti-government stance yet carried critical articles, as an example of a civic group encouraging more social consciousness.⁶⁸ But with the 2001 general election nearing, the authorities changed their mind. As the government was confronted with a growing number of websites discussing political issues, including Think Centre and Singapore Window, among others, Sintercom became the first victim of a stricter regime on Singapore's

65 Gomez, James 2006, p. 14.

66 Siew, Alfred 2001.

67 Gomes, James 2006, p. 12.

68 George, Cherian 2006, p. 114.

cyberspace.⁶⁹

In the run-up to the election of late 2001, Sintercom was asked again to register under the Class Licence Scheme, and this time there was no escape. Website founder Tan Chong Kee handed in the required forms, but also sent all published posts and articles from Sintercom for clearance by the authorities. The Broadcasting Authority refused to judge the material. In August of the same year, Tan closed the website because he felt he might get into trouble as “a lot of content in Sintercom can already be interpreted as unacceptable.” He found that civil society was a lost cause in Singapore: “The government wants you to volunteer, but I feel they don’t want you to be critical and try to change the system through civil society activism. It’s not a tenable setup.”⁷⁰

Since 1996, Singapore’s opposition parties have also begun to establish websites, with the National Solidarity Party being foremost among them. Similar to operators of non-party websites, they ran into trouble with the authorities over several issues regarding campaigning on the Internet. Their experience has discouraged other parties from building up a strong presence in cyberspace.⁷¹

The Sintercom incident marked the end of the “height of civil society’s online political expression”⁷² from 1997 to 2001. After that, it came as no surprise that the government was keeping a tighter rein on election campaigning and political debate in the World Wide Web.

In early 2001, the government had already introduced the Political Donations Act, which allowed the authorities to gazette any organization it deemed political as a political association, supposedly in order “to prevent foreigners from interfering in Singapore’s domestic politics through funding of candidates and political associations.”⁷³ Think Centre and Open Singapore Centre, founded by opposition politicians Chee Soon Juan and J.B. Jeyaretnam, were the first organizations gazetted under the new law in April 2001.⁷⁴

69 www.thinkcentre.org was set up by writer and researcher James Gomez in 1999. It aims “to critically examine issues related to political development, democracy, rule of law, human rights and civil society.” www.singaporewindow.org and its chief editor Justus Semper aim “to promote a just and participatory society in Singapore.”

70 Siew, Alfred 2001.

71 Gomez, James 2008, p. 595, p. 597.

72 Gomez, James 2006, p. 15.

73 See: <http://www.elections.gov.sg/registry.html>

74 For details see: George, Cherian 2006, p. 120-138; Gomez, James 2006, p. 17. Reuters newswire, March 30, 2001, retrieved November 14, 2011, from: <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw01/010330re.htm>

In August 2001 Singapore's rulers announced amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Act to regulate Internet campaigning. Put to use in October, the regulations allowed political parties to campaign in the World Wide Web, but non-governmental organizations were proscribed from campaigning for any party and from carrying party banners or candidate profiles. The act also prohibited the publication of opinion polls and election surveys during the election campaign.⁷⁵

While critics claimed the rules were set to curb freedom of speech and restrict public debate, the government argued that "a free-for-all Internet campaigning environment without rules was not advisable."⁷⁶

Think Centre was the first organization to be targeted by the new laws as it was urged by the government to remove some content regarded as political advertising from its website.⁷⁷

The general election was eventually called for November 3, 2001. In the run-up to polling day, the PAP government took a hard line by bringing into force further legislation to regulate and control political expression on the Internet. The new laws of 2001, which led, for example, to the closure of Sintercom, made "alternative reporting on the election suffer a setback."⁷⁸

When elections were called in 2006, the PAP rulers, as expected, further tightened the reins for political content on the web. The changes in legislation mainly followed the technological progress in the Internet. Blogs became a new phenomenon on the World Wide Web with audio and video files offering new forms of publishing political content.⁷⁹

Satirical website Talking Cock is just one example of blogs which were started, often by a revolving door of volunteers, in the early years of the new millennium.⁸⁰

75 See: <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view/w3p;page=0;query=Compld%3A9ce2cb06-0f51-450b-99e4-d1416ae5762c;rec=0>

76 See: New York Times, August 24, 2001. Retrieved November 12, 2011, from: http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/24/business/worldbusiness/24iht-t13_14.html ; Reuters newswire, August 13, 2001. Retrieved November 12, 2011, from: <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw01/010813re.htm>

77 Gomez, James 2006, p. 19; George, Cherian 2006, p. 125.

78 Gomez, James 2006, p. 20.

79 See: Ibid., p. 21.

80 www.talkingcock.com was set up in 2000 and describes itself as "Singapore's Premier Satirical Humour Website". Its editors note that "TalkingCock is clearly NOT a political website (i.e. it has

Whereas these sites “are not politically robust and have not come under fire,”⁸¹ the authorities reacted when more and more political blogs sprung up closer to the polls set for May 2006. Then Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, Balaji Sadasivan, told parliament in April 2006 that “private or individual bloggers” had to register with the MDA “if they persistently propagate, promote or circulate political issues relating to Singapore.”⁸² The government did not amend any new legislation prior to the polls, but “clarified” the existing rules for election campaigning, obviously aiming to daunt all people who planned to discuss politics in the worldwide web. Balaji made clear that the streaming of podcasts and videocasts with political content were prohibited for individual bloggers, meaning that, for example, pictures of election rallies were not to be posted.⁸³ The “clarification” of the rules not only affected bloggers, but also political parties which had begun to or planned to put podcasts on their websites.⁸⁴

As usual, however, the “clarifications” given by the government were deliberately kept ambiguous, “leaving bloggers very much on their own to decide how brave they wanted to be to test the boundaries of free speech.”⁸⁵ Singapore’s bloggers eventually chose to make their stand. In the run-up to polling day on May 6th, some 50 websites with political content, including podcasts and videocasts, emerged with the number of posts peaking at 200 per day.⁸⁶ Blogger Alex Au made history when he posted a report, On Hougang Field, on his blog Yawning Bread, which described an election rally of the Workers’ Party and included a photo.⁸⁷ Overall, “once more it was public defiance that breached the censorship regime.”⁸⁸

The growing activity by Singapore bloggers in the 2006 election campaign disproved many sceptical views that said Singaporeans were not really interested in using the net “as a tool for democratic expression for fear of

no political agenda of its own) but a satirical one, i.e. it engages in social comment through the use of biting humour. Commenting on politics is part of this, but not our sole aim at all.”

81 Gomez, James 2006, p. 23.

82 See: Parliament Sitting on April 3, 2006, retrieved November 12, 2011, from: <http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=149>

83 Ibid.

84 See: Gomez, James 2006, p. 24.

85 Russell, Heng Hiang Khng 2010, p. 527.

86 Ibid. See also: Gomez, James 2006, p. 25.

87 See: George, Cherian 2010, p. 257f. Launched in 1996 by gay activist Alex Au, <http://yawningbread.wordpress.com/> is a blog which debates a range of social issues on a more philosophical level.

88 Russell, Heng Hiang Khng 2010, p. 257.

running afoul of the law.”⁸⁹

In a review of the polls, newly-elected PAP legislator Denise Phua acknowledged that there had been “heavy political traffic in cyberspace” during the campaign, “most of which [was] negative to the PAP.”⁹⁰

Despite its stern warnings before the polls, the government stuck to its “light-touch approach” in ruling the Internet. For the academic Tan Tarn How from Singapore’s Institute of Polity Studies (IPS) the government’s decision not to interfere corresponds with one of its principles in dealing with dissent, namely guarding the mainstream, but tolerating the fringe: “The political Internet in the form of blogs, although very active and often sharply critical, is seen as a fringe and has thus been more tolerated.”⁹¹

Another obvious reason for the PAP rulers’ tolerance was that despite all Internet media activity, the ever-ruling party has handily won all elections since the rise of political websites, gaining 65, 75.3 and 66.6 per cent of the votes in the 1997, 2001 and 2006 general elections, respectively, and holding an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats.⁹² This means that “in electoral terms the Internet has not been able to make any impact on the outcome of election results.”⁹³ For the opposition parties, “the kind of impact on the electoral outcome [they] had hoped the Internet [would] provide has not been forthcoming.”⁹⁴ One reason for that, concludes James Gomez, is clearly that “a population de-politicised for many years may not have the will to act even if information reaches them.”⁹⁵

The government has countered any effort by opposition parties and Internet activists to level the field of political competition with new legislation. However, the rise of the Internet as a tool for political discourse and the unbroken will of some activists to make their stand in cyberspace have changed the game at least a bit.

89 Tan, Tarn How. In: Straits Times, April 7, 2006. Retrieved November 12, 2011, from: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/pub/pa_Tarnhow_st070406_Chances%20poor%20that%20public%20will%20take%20to%20the%20Net%20during%20polls.pdf

90 Phua, Denise. NUS Political Dialogue 23. May 2006. Retrieved November 12, 2011, from: <http://www.pap.org.sg/articleview.php?id=1019&cid=23>

91 Tan, Tarn How 2006.

92 For election results see: http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html

93 Gomez, James 2006, p. 27.

94 Gomez, James 2008, p. 609.

95 Ibid.

Since 2006, the mainstream media are no longer the only source of information; rather, they see themselves in competition with Internet forums. Shortly after the polls, in May 2006 Singapore Press Holdings launched a website, Stomp (Straits Times Online Mobile Print), which allows citizens to post videos and news while adhering to the law.⁹⁶

On the other hand, the rise of political websites between 1997 and 2006 inspired more Singaporeans to follow in the footsteps of Sintercom, Yawning Bread and others. In December 2006, one of Singapore's most prominent and influential socio-political blogs, The Online Citizen (TOC), came to life, followed by the Temasek Review in 2007.⁹⁷ In the run-up to the 2011 general election, TOC, which covers a broad range of topics including inequalities in society and migrant workers' rights, played a prominent role in a controversy over the government's Internet regime.

96 See: Gomez, James 2006, p. 30. See www.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/sp/stsite/section-stomp.html and <http://www.stomp.com.sg/>

97 www.temasekreview.com/ was not accessible as of November 14, 2011, but a note said it was "coming soon" after undergoing restructuring and redesigning. The site, which was renamed Temasek Review Emeritus after a legal tussle with Singapore state investor Temasek Holdings Ltd over its name, was shut down for a while, but reportedly plans to continue operation. See: <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/temasek-review-emeritus-continue-operations-052414441.html>

The Internet in the 2011 General Election:

Amplifying unhappiness on the ground

Singapore posted record economic growth of 14.5 per cent for 2010, so the bets were on that the government would call elections early in 2011 to benefit from the exceptional performance. In March the government presented a budget with goodies for all citizens, hoping to pacify the growing unhappiness Singaporeans felt about rising costs of living, the influx of foreign workers and increasing competition with foreigners for housing and jobs.⁹⁸

With elections looming, the government sent a chill through Singapore's cyberspace. In December 2010, TOC had organised a political forum. While opposition parties used the stage to present their views, the PAP declined the invitation.⁹⁹ On January 11, 2011 – in an obvious attempt to draw boundaries for political blogs and websites – the Prime Minister's Office declared its intention to gazette TOC as a political association under the Political Donations Act. As TOC "has the potential to influence the opinions of their readership and shape political outcomes" the move would ensure that the website was not funded by foreign sources, as prohibited by the Act.¹⁰⁰ The Office assured TOC that, apart from being gazetted, it was "entirely free to continue with its normal, lawful operations." Simultaneously, the MDA asked TOC to register as a political site under its vague regulations.

TOC's editors at first rejected the government's request, saying it was unreasonable and "borne of political paranoia," but eventually they complied. In contrast to Sintercom in 2001, TOC decided to carry on. Interim chief editor Ravi Philemon felt that the site's freedom of expression was not hampered by the gazetting, "but our ability to grow at a faster rate is."¹⁰¹ TOC's calm response and its transparency in dealing with the authorities helped the website to survive the government's action. TOC kept its status as one of Singapore's

98 For details of the budget see: http://app2.mof.gov.sg/budget_2011/default.aspx

99 See: <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2010/12/face-to-face-forum-that-elephant-in-the-room-2/>

100 Letter from the Prime Minister's Office, January 11, 2011, sent as a press release to foreign media. All statements from the office and from TOC can be found on: <http://theonlinecitizen.com/?s=gazette>

101 See: Interview on TOC, August 27, 2011, retrieved November 12, 2011, from: <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/08/the-online-citizen-a-fully-fledged-citizen/>

leading Internet sources for socio-political news and comments.

In keeping with its tradition, prior to the polls the PAP government amended the Parliamentary Elections Act in April 2010.¹⁰²

For the first time, Singapore's rulers allowed the use of Internet and social media as well as online videos and podcasts during the election campaign. This liberalization, however, was accompanied by a new restriction.¹⁰³ The bill also introduced a "cooling-off day" before election day with no campaigning allowed "to give voters some time to reflect rationally on issues raised during the election before going to the polls."¹⁰⁴ Exemptions from campaigning on cooling-off day included, among others, broadcasts by political parties on television and "the transmission of personal political views by individuals to other individuals, on a non-commercial basis, using the Internet, telephone or electronic means."¹⁰⁵

Critics warned that the cooling-off day was likely to be abused to the benefit of the PAP government since the mainstream media could publish biased news reports attacking the opposition, while answers by opposition parties were likely to be deemed forbidden election campaigning.¹⁰⁶

Although restrictions on Internet campaigning had been relaxed, observers objected to the bill's ambiguity.¹⁰⁷ As in earlier elections, the government kept the rules "vague to create fear and anxiety so that self-censorship limits online political expression."¹⁰⁸

As a result, bloggers came up with different strategies for operating in the grey area deliberately set by the authorities. While some respected the rules and ceased all postings which could be deemed political campaigning on

102 For details of the Act see: http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_parliamentary.html . The website has a link to the complete version of the Act.

103 For more on the government's balancing of liberalization and control see: Ortmann, Stephan 2011.

104 See: http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_parliamentary.html

105 Ibid.

106 See: Workers' Party website, April 27, 2011, retrieved November 14, 2011, from: <http://wp.sg/2010/04/parliamentary-elections-amendment-bill/#more-967>

107 A comment on TOC, March 16, 2011, for example, said: "Webmasters and blog owners could find themselves in a conundrum because there is no clarity regarding what is allowed or disallowed on the internet on polling day or the eve of polling day." Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2010/03/toc-editorial-cooling-off-day-may-lead-to-heated-confusion/>

108 Gomez, James 2010, p. 14.

the eve of the cooling-off day, others just disregarded the regulations.¹⁰⁹ In a recurrence of what bloggers did during the 2006 election, “most simply ignored what they considered to be unreasonable restrictions and just went ahead.”¹¹⁰

With the loosened grip on political discussion in the Internet, Singapore’s opposition parties, which have limited financial and human resources, for the first time had the chance to use social networks like Facebook or Twitter to mobilize supporters for election rallies. Both the PAP and the six opposition parties, which fielded 82 candidates, the highest number in decades, to contest 87 parliamentary seats, extensively used Facebook to push young, unknown candidates.¹¹¹

Pictures of huge crowds gathering at opposition rallies were posted on party websites and political blogs. Political discussion in Singapore’s Internet surged.¹¹² All these developments clearly had an impact on the docile mainstream media. To keep their credibility, they had no choice but to devote more space to the opposition. The *Straits Times* website dedicated a special portal to the coverage of the election, using Facebook and Twitter.

During the campaign, the PAP candidates found the ground more hostile than in earlier elections. There was “a strong current of unhappiness on bread-and-butter issues such as costs of living, housing, the widening income gap, and immigration.”¹¹³ In an attempt to bring voters back into the PAP line, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew resorted to the weapons that had worked so well for the rulers in the past. He warned voters in a hotly contested constituency that they would have “five years to live and repent” if they voted for the opposition.¹¹⁴ The strategy backfired as his comment stirred some outrage. His son, Prime

109 See: George, Cherian 2011a.

110 Ibid.

111 Nicole Seah, a 24-year-old candidate of the National Solidarity Party, shot to fame when she managed to build up a large group of supporters on her Facebook page, but she eventually lost in the election. The PAP used Facebook to bring 27-year-old Teo Pei Ling to the fore. She stirred some controversy with embarrassing photos and comments on the website, but managed to be elected in a slate of candidates in a multi-member constituency. Foreign Minister George Yeo, a PAP veteran, was a forerunner on Facebook. Yeo ultimately lost in the election as a candidate in the hotly contested Aljunied ward.

112 An interesting tool to measure activity on the Internet was the Singapore GE 2011 tracker on <http://ge.swarm.is/>.

113 See: dpa German Press Agency, May 6, 2001. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1637412.php/Singapore-voters-cool-off-before-Saturday-s-election

114 Ibid.

Minister Lee Hsien Loong, swiftly sought to defuse his father's remarks, saying the elder Lee was famous for his "solid hard talk" and that his own generation of younger leaders had a different style.¹¹⁵ Facing widespread resentment during the election campaign, Prime Minister Lee – in an unprecedented gesture for PAP leaders – publicly apologized for mistakes of his government.¹¹⁶

In the May 7 election, the PAP won 60.1 per cent of the votes, down from 66.6 per cent in 2006. It was the PAP's worst result in decades, but the party still kept an overpowering majority in parliament, winning 81 of 87 seats. The opposition, which was far more homogenous and united than in earlier elections, gained historic victories, winning a record six seats, all by the Workers' Party. Even more important, for the first time the opposition won a multi-member constituency, usually seen as a PAP stronghold, when a slate of five candidates of the Workers' Party defeated a PAP team led by highly-regarded Foreign Minister George Yeo.¹¹⁷

In a sobering analysis Prime Minister Lee said the PAP understood "that this election was a watershed election," as voters made clear that they desired "to see more opposition voices in parliament to check the PAP government."¹¹⁸ Lee said the Internet and social media had also "had an impact in this election, quite bigger than in previous elections."¹¹⁹

The PAP began some soul-searching and pledged a more humble and human style of government.¹²⁰ Old-guard politicians like Lee Kuan Yew and former prime minister Goh Chok Tong stepped down from their cabinet posts.¹²¹

Many observers and media were quick to brand the 2011 general election an "Internet election," implying that the polls have largely been decided by social media, political blogs and Internet forums after the government permitted

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 For detailed results see: http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_results2011.html

118 See: dpa German Press Agency, May 8, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1637724.php/Historic-gains-for-opposition-in-Singapore-election

119 Ibid.

120 See: dpa German Press Agency, May 9, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2001, from: http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1637883.php/Singapore-rulers-begin-soul-searching-after-election

121 dpa German Press Agency, May 14, 2011. A joint statement by Lee and Goh said: "After a watershed general election, we have decided to leave the cabinet and have a completely younger team of ministers to connect to and engage with this young generation in shaping the future of our Singapore."

election campaigning in cyberspace for the first time.

No doubt, the Internet has opened up political debate in Singapore and provided more space for information, engagement and participation, especially in the run-up to the May election. Singapore's online media "reflected what was on the ground much more than what the mainstream media had ever done in the last 35 years or so."¹²² But it is questionable if the Internet played a decisive role in the 2011 general election.

The PAP's fall in popularity has occurred for many reasons. Unhappiness with the government's handling of hot social issues is one explanation; the alienation of the PAP rulers from their subjects and their arrogant style of governing also played a role. Most voters clearly wanted to send a warning to their leaders.

The PAP's drop in voter support also had a demographic dimension. According to official statistics, 46 per cent of the 2.2 million voters were between 20 and 44 years of age and born after Singapore gained independence in 1965. For them, the PAP's success story of bringing the tiny island from third world to first world "has little traction, and young voters are less enamoured of the PAP."¹²³

Cherian George, a former *Straits Times* journalist and now associate professor at Wee Kim School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, concluded that Singapore did not experience an "Internet revolution" in the ballot. Instead, the outcome of the polls could be explained with "reference to good old fashioned economic factors" and had to be read as a call for better governance by the PAP.¹²⁴

Even before the polls opposition politicians admitted that the impact of social media and the Internet on election results would be limited, at least in the short term. Singapore Democratic Party's secretary general Chee Soon Juan said that social media were very new, "so it may take a little while for it to become very much part of the political scene, electoral scene."¹²⁵ Koh Choong

122 Mahizhnan, Arun 2011.

123 See: dpa German Press Agency, May 6, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1637412.php/Singapore-voters-cool-off-before-Saturday-s-election

124 George, Cherian 2011.

125 Lim, Philip 2011.

Yong, webmaster of the Workers' Party website, agreed, noting that new media catered only to a particular segment of the population and "it is probably not going to be the major determining factor in the winning of votes."¹²⁶

A survey by Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) suggested that the influence of the Internet media on the May election result had been overrated and that the ballot was not an "Internet election." Of 2,000 Singaporean voters polled for the survey, only 41.1 per cent read election news online. Only 30 per cent turned to Internet media such as Facebook and political blogs for information, and of these, 95.5 per cent continued to use at least some traditional mainstream media as a source of information. While Internet media clearly helped to raise political awareness in Singapore prior to the polls, its influence was "not as much as a lot people thought," concluded Tan Tarn How, senior research fellow at the IPS and one of the study's principal researchers.¹²⁷ However, Tan found that Internet media had significant "soft" impacts on voters, as these media enlarged voters' possibilities in the election, created a kind of community and let them feel more empowered and engaged.¹²⁸

126 Ibid.

127 For details of the study see: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/events/Impact%20on%20new%20media_041011/S1_1_Tan%20Tarn%20How_0410.pdf ; For some critical remarks on the study see: Wall Street Journal, October 6, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/media/yr2011/Internet%20election/WSJ_Poll%20Questions%20Social%20Media_061011.pdf

128 See: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/events/Impact%20on%20new%20media_041011/S1_1_Tan%20Tarn%20How_0410.pdf

Presidential Election 2011: *An echo of the May polls*

A few months after the parliamentary election, Singaporeans were called to the polls again on August 27 to elect a new president. Although non-partisan, the poll was widely seen as an unofficial referendum on the government - and the outcome gave the PAP another reason for some soul-searching.

The PAP's favourite, former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, won with a razor-thin margin over a political maverick, medical doctor and former PAP legislator Tan Cheng Bock. Tony Tan won 35.2 per cent of the votes with the runner up receiving 34.8 per cent and two other contenders scoring 25 per cent and 4.9 per cent, respectively. The results meant that nearly two-thirds of voters rebuffed Tony Tan.¹²⁹

The first contested presidential election in nearly two decades¹³⁰ followed a heated campaign marked by calls for a more independent presidency and stronger checks on the PAP government. While Tony Tan had quelled all calls for a more independent head of state, the other candidates had said they would seek a more active role as a president or even seek to transform the largely ceremonial post into a platform to challenge the government.¹³¹

As in the parliamentary election, all four presidential candidates used social media to spread their message and mobilize support. Their viewpoints were hotly debated in Internet forums. One blogger said his audience "shot through the roof" during the presidential election and "the real winner [of the polls] is you and me, the bloggers."¹³² The contenders, in a clear sign of acknowledgement, even engaged TOC to present their views in interviews

129 For the result see: http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_results.html

130 Since 1993 the post has been allocated without public ballots. In 1999 and 2005 a government committee found no other contender qualified to run in the polls. Tony Tan is only the second president to come in office by public vote.

131 For details on Tony Tan's stance see: <http://imcmsimages.mediacorp.sg/CMSFileserver/documents/006/PDF/20110818/1808HNP012.pdf>

132 See <http://james-crossroads.blogspot.com/2011/09/singapore-presidential-election-who-is.html>

and discussions.¹³³ The TOC team covering the election noted that candidates reached out to independent online journalists and gave them unhindered access to their campaigning events, with Tony Tan being one of the most proactive candidates. A comment in TOC went so far as to suppose that “the new media was more instrumental in deciding the winners in the Presidential Election, than it was in the last General Election”¹³⁴ – an impact, however, which is hard to measure.

The outcome of the presidential election was a replay of the general election results and “Tony Tan, the candidate closest to the PAP, bore the brunt of the people’s unhappiness with the government.”¹³⁵ But, as in the general election, the results also showed that Singaporeans were not ready yet for a dramatic change. Despite all the buzz in cyberspace, the average voter was not willing “to throw caution to the wind and cast a ballot for a candidate with an opposition accent.”¹³⁶

133 See: <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/08/toc-presidential-face-to-face-video-preview/>

134 TOC, August 30, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/08/new-media-engagement-may-have-given-tony-tan-and-tan-jee-say-the-edge/>

135 See: dpa German Press Agency, August 28, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.smu.edu.sg/news_room/smu_in_the_news/2011/sources/DPA_20110828_1.pdf

136 See: dpa German Press Agency, August 25, 2011. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.smu.edu.sg/news_room/smu_in_the_news/2011/sources/DPA_20110825_1.pdf

Conclusion and Outlook: *Tough times ahead for Singapore's Internet activists?*

Internet media activism has been developing in Singapore since the mid-1990s. A first wave of sites and blogs with political debate like Sintercom was followed by a second wave including TOC and Temasek Review. A third wave has just started with www.thesatayaclub.net, www.yousayisaywhoconfirm.sg, or www.publichouse.sg.¹³⁷

Despite the PAP government's efforts to curb online political expression with a control system that intimidates web users into self-censorship, bloggers have taken their stand in Singapore's cyberspace, providing alternative sources of information beyond the government-controlled mainstream media as well as platforms for more open political debate. Moreover, Singapore's Internet media has pushed the traditional media. The mainstream media has introduced channels for citizen journalism and devoted more coverage to opposition viewpoints. Observers have found a clear shift in the political management of the mainstream media, a change propelled by "the need to bridge the credibility gap that the mainstream media had long been suffering from".¹³⁸ Some Internet media have become agenda-setters, a role owned solely by the mainstream media in the past. Opposition parties with limited financial and human resources use social media like Facebook and Twitter as tools for mobilization.

Internet media activism has broadened the space for political participation and created an alternative public sphere, which, in the offline world, is strictly limited by restrictions on freedom of speech and expression. After decades of depoliticization, the Internet has helped to develop "an openly contentious culture" in Singapore.¹³⁹

However, the use of Internet and social media during the 2011 general election did not lead to a revolution in Singapore. Internet media activism certainly amplified the hostile reaction the PAP campaigners faced on the ground. But

137 Straits Times, October 7, 2011.

138 Mahizhnan, Arun 2011.

139 George, Cherian 2011

the PAP still enjoys a vast majority of votes and seats. Despite making some headway, especially with the rise of a younger generation of well-informed and well-educated Singaporeans, the Internet still has not yet had any major impact on Singapore parliamentary elections. Singaporeans still regard the PAP as “the natural party of government.”¹⁴⁰

But the voters have clearly signalled the PAP that they are no longer willing to be talked down to. The PAP’s relatively poor result in the May 7 ballot, followed by the narrow win of its favourite in the August presidential election, has prompted the party to pledge a makeover of its style of government and a change of its personnel. It remains to be seen if the PAP’s promise to be more consultative in its decisions will lead to a greater role for civil society in Singapore.¹⁴¹

Although some have suggested that the 2011 general election results made it possible to say for the first time that “there is a chance Singapore could become a liberal democracy,” this seems too optimistic.¹⁴² A more balanced prediction is that the PAP government will remain in power at least over the next decade, “but it will more than likely soften in style and evolve into a more conciliatory, sensitive, and inclusive government.”¹⁴³

Singapore has taken a few steps towards a more open, more democratic society, and the Internet media have contributed to this. But cyberspace activism alone cannot change the city-state’s authoritarian rule. It needs to be transferred into offline activism.¹⁴⁴ This, however, is an uphill task in the tightly-controlled city-state, regardless of any Internet activism, “Singapore remains an authoritarian country, and its government is more than capable of cracking down on any form of dissent.”¹⁴⁵ The shift from online action to offline action is difficult because “fears of a strong government response have made activists cautious as they move their efforts at mobilization from the

140 Ibid.

141 Koh, Gillian/Soon, Debbie 2011, p. 126.

142 See: Ortmann, Stephan 2011, p. 163. On p. 164 Ortmann acknowledges that “if the government decides to clamp down on the newly awakened political activism, it will certainly produce unforeseen consequences for the city-state’s political development.”

143 Tan, Kenneth Paul 2010, p. 4; George, Cherian 2011; Catherine Lim 2011, p. 27, forecast that “the accustomed hard-nosed, peremptory and arrogant PAP style will be changed into a softer, gentler, carefully crafted people-oriented approach.”

144 See: Weiss, Meredith L. 2011. Weiss makes several important points on the transfer from online activism into the offline world. I am very grateful that she sent me a copy of her paper. But as it was still a draft, I refrained from quoting from the text.

145 Ortmann, Stephan 2011, p. 161.

virtual world to the real world.”¹⁴⁶

Other factors, too, have so far limited the impact of Singapore’s cyber activism. Former TOC editor Andrew Loh, who set up www.publichouse.sg in September, admits that “right now, the Internet does not reflect the wider community of Singaporeans” and that more people need to come out with blogs. Some Internet media also lack quality, as people have tended to be anti-government because it was fashionable, but not because they had a proper understanding of an issue.¹⁴⁷

His last point is echoed by Cherian George, who found that most space in Singapore’s web is not committed to “reasoned debate,” but rather has “evolved into a grotesque mirror of offline public space” with the spectrum of views ranging from “rabidly anti-government to the moderately anti-government.”¹⁴⁸ As a consequence, the Internet could amplify the polarized status quo. George concludes that the Internet has the potential to push Singapore’s evolution to a more deliberate democracy, “but as of now this remains a promise that is largely unfulfilled.”¹⁴⁹

It is safe to assume that the PAP government will not allow the Internet media to tap their full potential. Over decades, it has created highly sophisticated mechanisms to control dissenting voices, online and offline. Any new challenge which the authorities may deem a threat to national stability and harmony is likely to be met with a tightening of the rules.

Comments by government leaders in the months after the May election suggested that there may be tough times ahead for Singapore’s political Internet activists. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in August branded the Internet as “anonymous, [...] chaotic, [...] unfiltered, unmoderated.” It “lends itself to many negative views and ridiculous untruths,” and the government

146 Ibid. A good example for the difficult shift from online protest to offline action was a boycott by football fans during the 2010 World Cup. The fans set up a Facebook page to protest against high TV fees. The page counted more than 27,000 members, but a protest rally organized at Speaker’s Corner was attended by just 200 protesters. See: dpa German Press Agency, June 6, 2010. Retrieved November 14, 2011, from: http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1561075.php/Singapore-football-fans-stage-protest-over-World-Cup-TV-fees

147 Straits Times, October 7, 2011.

148 George, Cherian 2011. Singapore’s blogs are indeed full of derogatory comments on the PAP government, filled with insults and abusive speech.

149 Ibid.

will do its best “to prevent untruths from circulating and being repeated.”¹⁵⁰ The Ministry of Law said it “will review legislation to deal with harmful and unlawful online conduct.”¹⁵¹ The Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts warned that “operating under a cloak of anonymity, some content creators also resort to lies and misinformation” and said it “will continue to refine our regulatory framework to safeguard community values and public interests.”¹⁵²

After ruling the Internet with a “light-touch” approach since 1996, backed by a set of strict offline laws as well as a skillfully crafted control system, Singapore’s authorities now seem poised to shift to a hard-line stance. The editors of TOC warned that “tougher regulations may be on the way” in a retreat from the former “pragmatic response to the nebulousness and dynamism of the Internet.”¹⁵³ TOC attributes any new plans to clamp down on the Internet to the PAP’s poor performance in the May polls, saying it would be “a disguised attempt by the government to extend its existing control over traditional media to online media, or otherwise discredit online media as being unreliable, destructive or divisive.” But regardless of any hurdles the government might put in the way of Internet media, “we will not be cowed, and our voices *will* be heard,” say TOC’s editors. The closing of one site in the web “is likely to be met by the blossoming of another ten.” Time will tell if their optimism is justified.

150 Lee Hsien Loong, National Day Rally Speech, August 14, 2011. Retrieved from: http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesinterviews/primeminister/2011/August/Prime_Minister_Lee_Hsien_Loongs_National_Day_Rally_2011_Speech_in_English.html

151 Ministry of Law, Addendum to the President’s Address, October 15, 2011. Retrieved from: <http://app2.mlaw.gov.sg/News/tabid/204/Default.aspx?ItemID=587>

152 Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, Addendum to the President’s Address, October 15, 2011. Retrieved from: <http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=79&ctl=Details&mid=540&ItemID=1329>

153 TOC, October 27, 2011. Retrieved from: http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/10/tocs-commitment-to-our-readers/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+theonlinecitizen+%28theonlinecitizen%29

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