Consolidating authoritarian rule: calibrated coercion in Singapore

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Abstract   Despite the persistence of authoritarian forms of rule, studies of state domination have seen little need to analyse the use of force against citizens. This essay argues that, while state violence is elemental, it is not straightforward. States have a range of repressive tools at their disposal, which they need to deploy rationally and with finesse if they are to consolidate their authoritarian systems. As a step towards problematizing state violence, this essay suggests the concept of calibrated coercion, which represses challengers with minimum political cost. Calibrated coercion is illustrated through an in-depth case study of press controls in Singapore, where one of the world's most successful hegemonic parties has governed continuously for four decades. Behind the stability of the press system, the Singapore government has made fundamental changes to its modes of control, with less frequent recourse to blunter instruments such as newspaper closures or arbitrary arrest. Instead, less visible instruments are increasingly used, with the media's commercial foundations turned against themselves.

Authoritarian rule is often regarded as simple for states to execute and unworthy of scholarly analysis. Far more attention has been devoted to the challenge of instituting and consolidating democracy. Part of the reason for this imbalance is conceptual: authoritarian rule cannot be studied without focusing on the state, and the state was for too long neglected by social science (Evans *et al.* 1985). Another reason is normative: the greater moral imperative to provide fledgling democracies, rather than would-be

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dictatorships, with the intellectual capital and policy advice that could help them entrench their chosen forms of government. There was also the understandable hope, after the fall of the Soviet empire, that authoritarian rule was merely a transitional phase, a detour en route to inevitable freedoms (Fukuyama 1992). Thus, the institutions and practices of authoritarian states, including illiberal democracies, continue to suffer scholarly neglect as sustainable political phenomena. Drawing on the Singapore case, this essay is a modest effort to redress that balance, by taking seriously authoritarian rule – or, more precisely, coercion by the state. It argues that, from the point of view of a regime wanting to consolidate its dominance, there are more intelligent and less intelligent ways to apply coercion. Some readers may find it hard to stomach this line of argument, believing that no coercion is good coercion. To such readers, what follows may occasionally seem like an apology, or prescription, for certain kinds of authoritarianism. On the other hand, any counter-hegemonic strategy must include a sophisticated understanding of what makes certain kinds of authoritarian rule endure, the better to resist and challenge them. This essay is aimed at that kind of understanding.

Few instances of authoritarian rule demand deeper analysis than Singapore. Although the city-state is small, with a population of less than 5 million, it provides an exceptionally instructive case study. Put simply, no existing state can match its record of political stability combined with high standards of socio-economic development. It has had no changeover of ruling party since 1959, and virtually no violent encounters between state and society for decades. In smooth and peaceful general elections held in May 2006, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) won 82 out of 84 parliamentary seats, with 66.6 per cent of the popular vote. Its upward mobility in socio-economic terms has been equally uninterrupted. Today, Singapore enjoys First World standards of living in most respects, while the PAP shows no hint of weakening its hold on political power. This achievement has reportedly attracted the attention of officials from China, Vietnam and other states who, unwilling to accept the liberal prescription that market liberalization can only be successful if accompanied by political competition, find in Singapore a model for having one's cake and eating it too. Singapore is also worthy of examination as a single case study because the longevity of the regime allows one to analyse changes over time. As will be shown, Singapore's political stability belies important shifts in coercive strategy, which may help to account for the endurance of the PAP.

Looking in particular at the way it has managed the press, this essay will argue that part of the PAP's success formula has been its ability to choose the right tools of repression for the right job. This is not to deny the importance of at least two other pillars of PAP hegemony – sound economic policy making, and a compelling ideology of nation building – about which much has already been written (see, for example, Chua 1995; George 2000). David Held (1989) has offered a seven-point scale marking various kinds of compliance on a continuum, with coercion at one extreme, ideal normative

agreement at the other, and apathy and pragmatic acquiescence in the middle. Most accounts of Singapore politics would hold that all seven modes of compliance apply there, and this essay will not suggest that coercion – calibrated or otherwise – is a sufficient explanation for PAP dominance.[1] However, coercion is certainly a necessary and hitherto poorly specified aspect of the total picture. Therefore, this essay looks inside the black box of coercion, to understand one particularly successful model for its application.

Coercion and power

In the Weberian view, the state cannot be made sense of without reference to its monopoly of legitimate physical force (Whimster 2004). Tilly's (1985) description of the state as the ultimate example of organized crime is even less flattering. However, while such views are in wide circulation, the use of force has not attracted as much scholarly analysis as has the other side of the hegemony coin, namely the processes of forging ideological consensus. This is not unexpected, since, as Gramsci observes, what is remarkable about capitalist societies is the way the ruling class has dominated without routine recourse to violence, and indeed usually with the consent of the ruled (Anderson 1976). Another possible reason for the relative lack of academic interest in coercion is the assumption that it does not need to be problematized, since there is nothing particularly complicated about the application of brute force.

Some social theorists have indicated otherwise. Hannah Arendt, in *On Violence* (1970), dismisses the notion that violence is merely the most flagrant manifestation of power. Power and violence (together with strength, force and authority) tend to be treated as synonymous terms because they are all means by which man rules over man, she notes. This tendency blinds us to the fact that while power can use violence, it cannot be based on violence. This is because power corresponds to the human ability to act in concert; it belongs to a group and exists only as long as the group coheres. 'Single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully', she writes (pp. 50–1). What power needs is legitimacy, and legitimacy is what is lost when violence is misapplied: 'To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power' (p. 54). Thus, violence leads to impotence. Even though violence, power and authority often appear together, they are not the same. Indeed, she says: 'Power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears when power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance' (p. 56). Michel Foucault is also sensitive to the idea that violence exacts a cost on its perpetrators. 'If you are too violent, you risk provoking revolts', he notes. Monarchical power operated on the principle of example. Lacking the capacity to deal with all criminals, the few who were arrested were punished spectacularly to frighten others. Such

use of violence was costly in proportion to its results: 'A great expenditure of violence is made which ultimately only had the force of an example. It even becomes necessary to multiply violence, but precisely by doing so one multiplies revolts' (Foucault 1980: 155). Hence, he realizes the need to move from a reliance on physical violence to a system of surveillance.

The idea that there are selfish, rational reasons for even dictators to exercise self-restraint in their use of violence has also been explored by Olson (2000). It is in a dictator's self-interest to practise self-restraint rather than slaughtering the goose that lays the golden egg, he argues. He observes that even criminals have a stake in their society. They would not want to be surrounded by poverty, since there would be less to steal. That an individual criminal would nonetheless be willing to strip a victim of all his belongings is explained by the fact that the criminal's stake in his society's prosperity, as well as his impact on it, is so small that he can ignore it. The calculation changes when the criminal is, say, a Mafia family with a monopoly of crime in a well-defined neighbourhood. Unrestrained crime would make business unprofitable, or provoke out-migration. The neighbourhood would then generate less income, and the gang would have less to cream off. Then, it becomes in the gang's own self-interest to restrain its criminal activity and to sell protection. The experience of 1920s warlord-controlled China offers a similar lesson, Olson says. Villagers were victimized by bandits, some of whom settled down in their midst. The people seemed to prefer these stationary bandits who taxed them relentlessly, compared with being plundered by roving bandits who would descend upon them occasionally but soon depart. Olson's explanation for this preference is that the stationary bandit, like the Mafia family, knew that he was better off limiting his predations. He even had an incentive to provide public goods that would make his territory more productive, such as irrigation schemes and police protection. 'It follows that the familiar metaphor of the predatory state is inadequate, even for autocracies with utterly selfish leaders', Olson concludes (p. 11). For Olson, democracy is not the sole factor explaining self-enforcing limits on the exercise of power. Equally important is the scope of the interest that the powerful have in the welfare of the society. Groups with narrow interests, like the petty criminal or the roving bandit, show little restraint. Those with encompassing interests, like the Mafia family or the stationary bandit, may rationally limit their predations.

The empirical relationship between states' use of coercion and political stability has been examined most thoroughly within the field of conflict studies. Employing large-scale cross-national regressions and in-depth comparative case studies, scholars have treated states' use of violence both as a dependent variable influenced by factors such as democracy and economic development, and as an independent variable affecting levels of social protest. There is wide agreement that the processes are complex, interactive, and as yet unyielding of a definitive picture. One consistent finding is that the amount of violence applied by states on their citizens is negatively correlated

with the level of democracy (Davenport 1995; Gupta *et al.* 1993; Henderson 1991) – though this sounds somewhat like a truism if not a tautology, since democracy is a system designed for peaceful resolution of differences. Governments are more accountable and responsive to the public in democracies than in non-democracies, and opposition groups are more likely to trust political channels than to resort to methods that might provoke the use of state force. Transitional governments are also more likely to tolerate dissent simply because they lack the institutional capacity to respond to every threat (Davenport 1995). Economic prosperity and sustained economic growth also appear to be associated with contexts that inhibit state violence, while sharp group differences in economic or ethnic terms can be difficult to manage peacefully. More difficult to pin down is the relationship between state actions and the tactics of opposition groups. Clearly, there is an interaction between the two, as both sides pick tactics based on the expected response, which in turn is based on past behaviours. For example, Moore (2000) finds that states switch from accommodation to repression if the former results in increased dissent. Conversely, if repression meets with more dissent, it will be substituted with accommodation. Gartner and Regan (1996) suggest that the benefits of repression increase as opponents' demands grow further from the status quo. These benefits are weighed against the costs of repression, both domestic and international. The costs – in terms of domestic support and foreign aid, for example – depend on how justified and proportionate a forceful response is seen to be. Too weak a response also bears a reputational cost, since states are looked to as ultimate preservers of order and security within their territories. In a rare in-depth case study of state violence, Ron (1997) reports on the evolution of Israeli methods against Palestinian detainees. The shift from more obvious types of torture towards more psychological forms of coercion resulted in more time-consuming interrogations, but was more effective in demoralizing the target population, precisely because the new methods left no physical scars, he notes.

All the above analyses share certain basic assumptions. First, rulers and ruled within dictatorships – no less than in democracies – are assumed to be self-interested and rational, in that they try to pick the best means of reaching their goals. Second, the coercive methods available to states span a wide range, varying in the actual amount of force used. Although practically all state actions, including administrative functions such as taxation, are ultimately underwritten by the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, there are conceptually meaningful distinctions to be drawn between, say, imposing a fine on an opponent, imprisoning him, or triggering his 'disappearance'. Third, different means of coercion are associated with different costs and benefits at different times. Each challenge is associated with an equilibrium response. A state's failure to calibrate its coercion accordingly will result in excessive cost, in terms of domestic and foreign support, and securing the conditions for economic growth.

The Singapore context

Singapore was a British colony until 1963, when it became a state within the Malaysian federation for two years. It has been an independent republic since 1965, with a unicameral parliamentary system based on the Westminster model. The prime minister is required to call general elections after, at most, five years of government. Opposition parties are legal. Although the PAP has subjected itself to elections at the constitutionally mandated intervals, it has not seen the need to limit its power substantially between those elections. Singapore is not constituted as a liberal democracy with deep civil liberties and failsafe checks against the abuse of government power. The executive dominates the legislative and judicial branches of the state, partly in response to a history of political instability. The post-war colonial period was marked by fierce communist insurgency that was forcibly put down through various emergency measures. The non-communist nationalists who led their countries to independence thus inherited both the tools for controlling insurgency and a hypersensitivity towards organized dissent. Modern Singapore has also been shaped by ethnic riots, which fostered a premium on order and strong government. Furthermore, Singapore's expulsion from the Malaysian federation in August 1965, together with its tiny size, has given its leaders an acute sense of national vulnerability, which they believe can be compensated for only through discipline and order. Singapore has retained and enhanced various illiberal laws that it inherited from the colonial administration. These include provisions allowing detention without trial, a licensing system for the press, discretionary registration of societies, and the requirement of permits for public gatherings. Independent Singapore was home to one of the world's longest-serving political prisoners, alleged communist Chia Thye Poh, who was imprisoned without trial for twenty-three years.

Singapore's hybrid political system has been labelled by political scientists as everything from authoritarian to semi-democratic. Other commentators and critics have been less complimentary, describing Singapore as totalitarian or a dictatorship. Larry Diamond (2002) classifies Singapore as an electoral autocracy – a state that has 'elections without democracy'. Underlining its exceptional stability, Diamond notes that of the seven electoral autocracies that existed around the world in the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore is one of only two (the other being Malaysia) that has survived as such. That stability is evident not only in the political system as a whole but also at the level of government. Singapore's ruling party has never lost power since 1959. Opposition parties have not occupied more than four seats in parliament since 1966. Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, led the government for thirty-one years, and his successor, Goh Chok Tong, for fourteen years. Political successions, including to current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2004, have been carefully planned and always on the PAP's own terms.

In trying to account for the stability of Singapore's political system and the longevity of the PAP, Held's compliance scale comes in useful. The PAP's longevity is partly accounted for by the people's 'instrumental acquiescence', based on their not-unfounded faith that the government will continue to deliver rising standards of living. In addition, there is also evidence of a normative consensus at work, maintained through the state's ideological domination. The PAP has drawn upon the legitimating power of elections, which are at least free and fair enough to attract the continued participation of all major opposition parties. Consent is also constructed around the idea of nation building, which evokes a sense of collective purpose, to fight common threats and work towards common goals. What the PAP calls 'good governance' and its tangible results – rapid and equitable socio-economic development – add to Singaporeans' genuine and freely given support for the ruling party. Coercion, nevertheless, remains one of the pillars of PAP dominance. There has been no move to repeal Singapore's most repressive laws, such as the Internal Security Act, which allows arrest without warrant and detention without trial. On five-point repression scale, with '5' representing the worst level of state terror, Henderson rates Singapore as a '2', together with other countries where there is 'a limited amount of imprisonment for non-violent political activity. However, few persons are affected, torture and beating are exceptional ... Political murder is rare' (1991: 127). The array of repressive tools at the government's disposal remains large. What has changed is the manner in which those tools are used. Generally speaking, there has been a shift from more spectacular punishments, such as imprisonment, towards more behind-the-scenes controls. Economic sanctions are favoured over those that violate the sanctity of the individual. And, controls are targeted at limited numbers of producers and organizers of dissent, rather than at ordinary citizens. In short, coercion is increasingly calibrated for maximum effectiveness at minimum cost. The PAP's press controls provide a good example.

Calibrated coercion and the Singapore press

According to Lee Kuan Yew (2000: 218), the architect of the press system, 'Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government.' The PAP's press system is one of dozens of authoritarian models around the world in which states claim that the suspension of press freedom is in the public interest. What makes Singapore's system exceptional is its sheer longevity and stability, maintained with declining levels of overt repression. The last time that the Singapore press faced the full coercive might of the government was in 1971, when the Lee administration acted against three newspapers. In late April of that year, Lee Kuan Yew accused the Chinese-language press of stoking up chauvinism in its coverage of the decline of Chinese-medium schools. On 2 May, four senior

Nanyang Siang Pau executives were detained under the Internal Security Act. The English-language *Eastern Sun* was then accused of receiving communist funds from Hong Kong. Its senior staff quit, and the paper closed down. Lee Kuan Yew alleged that *Nanyang Siang Pau*, the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald* were involved in 'black operations' against Singapore. On 28 May, the *Herald*'s licence was withdrawn and its senior expatriate journalists expelled from the country. In its ten months of publication, it had 'attracted quite a following, with its lively, entertaining, refreshingly irreverent approach' (Turnbull 1995: 291).

Lee's charge of 'black operations' (2000: 215–18) is challenged by critics who see the affair simply as an act of flagrant censorship. One interpretation of events is that the *Eastern Sun* and the *Herald* were dragged into the web by *Nanyang Siang Pau*'s intransigence – showing how raw coercion can spin out of control. The government may have miscalculated when it assumed that the Chinese paper would be silenced by the arrests. Instead, it continued to challenge the arrests in its columns, precipitating something of a crisis of credibility for the government. According to this theory, the *Eastern Sun* was sacrificed as a red herring: highlighting its admittedly dubious funding would help persuade Singaporeans of the threat of Chinese communist subversion. Attacking an English-language paper had the additional advantage of appearing even-handed to the Chinese-educated (Polsky 1971). Historian Mary Turnbull (1995: 293) records that the following years did bring forth 'revelations about the role of foreign slush funds in infiltrating the regional press', but concludes that 'there was no evidence that either the *Eastern Sun* or the *Herald* were being influenced by their backers'.

Turnbull adds that 'the events of May 1971 sent shock waves through Singapore and raised concerns about press freedom' (p. 291). The *Herald*'s managing director, Jimmy Hahn, said at the time that if its permit were withdrawn, Mr Lee would be 'guilty of premeditated murder of a newspaper' (quoted in Seow 1998: 85). Such was the sense of moral outrage that could be stoked among a newspaper's loyal readers. A 'Save the *Herald*' fundraising campaign duly attracted university students and other educated Singaporeans. Perhaps even more worrying than the tarnishing of the young republic's democratic credentials was the damage done to Singapore's freshly minted image as an investor-friendly economy. Reminding the world that a newspaper is also a business, the *Herald*'s management pointed out that the government had in effect moved 'to interfere in a commercial enterprise in an unprecedented manner' (quoted in Seow 1998: 83). In the same vein, a writer who had been based in Singapore told a Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents Club gathering that foreign businessmen were concerned about 'arbitrary Singapore Government interference in the private sector' (Polsky 1971). The PAP may have acted decisively against the offending newspapers, be it could not control the fallout as effectively.

Learning the lessons of 1971, Lee Kuan Yew decided that the colonial-era instruments of discretionary licensing and preventive detention were too

crude for the PAP's purposes. They were adequate for a state content to rule by force, but not sufficient for a hegemonic nation-building project. Recourse to these instruments risked stripping the consensual aspect of its rule and exposing the raw coercive power underneath. To consolidate its system of rule, the PAP would have to avoid open battles with the media – even if it would never lose such battles – and turn them into willing ideological vehicles of the state. The PAP wove these principles into new press laws enacted in 1974. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) retained discretionary licensing as its cornerstone, but introduced unique legislative innovations of subtle genius. In addition to a new but commonplace ban on foreign ownership, the NPPA required newspaper companies to be publicly listed. Public listing – with ordinary shareholders limited to a 3 per cent stake after a 1977 amendment to the NPPA – meant that Singapore would never again see the likes of the Lee Rubber family that was behind the recalcitrant *Nanyang Siang Pau*. 'I do not subscribe to the Western practice that allows a wealthy press baron to decide what voters should read day after day', Lee Kuan Yew would say later (2000: 218). To be doubly sure, the NPPA created a class of management shares to be held by government nominees, institutionalizing a mechanism for the government to influence a newspaper's editorial direction without totally subverting the market. Management shares, which have 200 times the voting rights as ordinary shares, were allocated to banks and other establishment figures. 'They would remain politically neutral and protect stability and growth because of their business interests', Lee said.

One of the other political advantages of the NPPA regime is to shift the emphasis from a highly public licensing-and-censorship model to one based on behind-the-scenes self-censorship. As a result, critics of the press in Singapore tend to blame the newspapers themselves more than they do the underlying system of laws and regulations. This is quite unlike 1971, when, as the 'Save the *Herald*' campaign demonstrated, critics viewed newspapers as victims of government repression. The traditionally political relationship between press and society has been reconstituted as a producer–consumer one.

Other authoritarian governments that desire failsafe media control – like the Chinese Communist Party – tend simply to take over ownership of newspapers. Those that do not want to nationalize the media resort to repressive censorship and routine brutality towards the press. While critics of the PAP sometimes liken it to such totalitarian or dictatorial regimes, the parallel is misleading, underestimating the calibration that has been built into press controls. The PAP has achieved effective guidance of the press without either nationalizing ownership or brutalizing journalists. In addition to creative legislation, the government has exercised fine political judgement to maintain a press system that balances the political interests of the PAP government, the profit motives of publishers, the professional and pecuniary needs of journalists, and the public's demand for information and analysis. Not all these stakeholders are happy with the system, all of the time. However, none of them has been so unhappy as to opt out of it entirely.

Thus, consumers of news in Singapore, the main victims of the lack of press freedom, frequently complain about political bias in their news media, but have not been sufficiently outraged to boycott mainstream newspapers and swarm to independent websites – which has occurred in Malaysia (George 2006). The Singapore government has allowed the press just enough autonomy to preserve a modicum of credibility. Its policy may be partly influenced by a conscious desire 'to pre-empt the situation that has occurred in Malaysia where the government-controlled domestic media lost much of their appeal and credibility' (Rodan 2004). Like other authoritarian governments, the PAP coveted the media's power as a propaganda tool. But unlike most authoritarian rulers, Lee Kuan Yew understood that this power depended on the media's credibility, which would be crushed by excessive government interference. Thus, when retired senior civil servant and Lee loyalist S. R. Nathan was given the job of executive chairman of the *Straits Times* group in 1982, Lee reminded him that the flagship newspaper had a 140-year history and should be treated like a china bowl (Turnbull 1995).

Thus, self-restraint in the use of its regulatory muscle has been a vital part of the PAP's formula for long-term management of the press, post-1971. Calibrated coercion provides journalists with periodic reminders of who is in charge, but also enough room to practise some professionally satisfying journalism. Cheong Yip Seng, until recently the editor-in-chief of the *Straits Times* group, has written that the newspapers have become 'a little more confident, assertive, and critical'. In an article entitled 'The Singapore Press: How Free, How Credible?', Cheong acknowledges that the government has 'enormous reserve powers over ownership and control of editorial policy'. But he argues that despite a history of poor press relations, the government 'does not want a docile press' but 'a livelier, more credible press with high professional standards'. Instances of government interference through 'telephone calls to influence treatment of news or to reprimand . . . are much fewer nowadays', he adds. He takes comfort from the fact that a new generation of political leaders is emerging, who know they need a more credible mass media to communicate with a more sophisticated electorate. This analysis would not sound out of place coming from a Singapore editor in around 2006. It was in fact written twenty-five years earlier (Cheong 1981). The PAP's resilient system of press management has not been static, but maintains a dynamic equilibrium between realism and hope: realism dismisses as foolhardy any dream of changing the media system's wider political framework, while hope reassures journalists that there is a professional role for them even within the current system.

The authoritarian impulse behind Singapore's press system is nothing new. More remarkable is the PAP's use of the global forces, championed by capitalist liberal democracies, to reinforce a profoundly illiberal system. Less intelligent regimes assumed that they had to subvert the press completely in order to assure their preferred results, but Lee Kuan Yew realized that he could work with the news media's own tendencies. This strategy

has succeeded because journalism's main impetus by the late twentieth century was commerce, not ideology. Worldwide, the free press has pursued profit more than political change (McChesney 2001). The present reading of Singapore's press history corroborates Rodan's (2004) thesis, that information control by authoritarian regimes is not necessarily inconsistent with market development. Singapore, in his view, may represent a viable alternative political model for capitalist development, rather than an exception to the rule. He observes that markets are highly seductive for profit-seeking companies, leading to 'widespread self-censorship to avoid confrontation with authoritarian regimes and protect access to those markets' (p. 16).

Managing the Internet

Calibrated coercion extends to the PAP's formula for managing new communication technologies such as the Internet. Regulators adopted what they called a 'light touch' approach. Internet access was rolled out as part of an ambitious information technology vision conceived within a national strategy for survival in global economic competition. When citizens started using the medium for forms of expression that would not be tolerated in the mainstream media, the government's first response was to join the contest of ideas in cyberspace. For example, PAP activists began posting pro-government views on websites and bulletin boards to counter what they felt were unbalanced, ill-informed and irresponsible opinions circulating in cyberspace. Reliance on the marketplace of ideas did not last long. Indeed, Singapore was one of the first countries in the world to devise Internet content regulations. Parliament enacted a new broadcasting law in 1994, formally extending the government's jurisdiction to electronic communication. The authorities followed up in July 1996 with new regulations specifically for the Internet. They required Internet service providers to route traffic through proxy servers so that they could filter out sites that regulators found objectionable (George 2006). The compulsory use of proxy servers is an example of how the 'architecture' of the Internet can be modified by regulators, contrary to the old assumption that cyberspace cannot be governed (Lessig 1999). It has also been pointed out that such forms of Internet censorship demonstrate how the means of curbing freedom of speech can – for the first time in the history of communication – be technologically integrated within the medium (Chalaby 2000). This makes control more efficient and less visible.

   The other main feature of the regulations was a 'class licence' system. This introduced into new media the old principle of licensing. However, instead of having to apply for individual licences, Internet content providers were deemed automatically licensed as a class, and could therefore operate as before. Sites that sought public attention and dealt with what were deemed to be more sensitive areas, principally religion and politics, had to meet an additional requirement. They would have to register with the regulatory agency. Registration required the editorial team to sign a declaration saying that they

would take 'full responsibility for the contents on the website(s) and . . . all reasonable steps to ensure that such contents comply with the laws of Singapore'. Singapore's mid-1996 announcement of these regulations was greeted with vociferous protest from the Internet's passionate early adopters. International news coverage was largely negative, associating the moves with Singapore's reputation for draconian rule. In response, the authorities said that the proxy server barrier was intended only for pornography and not for political sites – a distinction that has not been forthcoming in the regulation of other media. The government also appointed a National Internet Advisory Committee chaired by a scientist. As a result of the committee's recommendations, the regulator revised the Internet Code of Practice to clarify the responsibilities of licensees. The regulators also amended their content guidelines. Their original list of discouraged material included content that jeopardized public security or national defence; excited disaffection against the government; or undermined public confidence in the administration of justice – terms borrowed from existing legislation. These items were expunged from the new code, placing the emphasis squarely on sexual content and material harmful to racial and religious harmony (George 2006).

The regulator, the Media Development Authority or MDA, describes its content regulation as taking a 'light touch' approach. Its website goes to the extent of addressing so-called myths about its regulations. For example:

> Myth: MDA is stifling religious and political discussion on the Internet. Fact: MDA does not stop religious and political bodies from putting up web sites. We ask that they register with us as content providers to emphasize the need to be responsible in what they say. This is important, given the multi-racial and multi-religious nature of our society, and is consistent with existing regulations pertaining to print and other electronic material.
>
> (Media Development Authority n.d.)

Singapore's first prosecution of an individual engaged in political expression on the Internet took place in November 2001, more than seven years after the medium's commercial launch. A man was arrested for allegedly posting an inflammatory article on the Singaporeans For Democracy website. Arguing that the prime minister had entered a polling place in violation of election laws in 1997, his article urged Singaporeans 'to break the same law' in the forthcoming elections. The writer's act was classified as an attempt to incite disobedience to the law that is likely to lead to a breach of peace, an offence punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. The authorities later dropped the charges, saying that he was mentally ill. The case confirmed fears that the regulators' 'light-touch' policy did not mean that they were not watching online politics closely, or that they would refrain from removing

the kid gloves from time to time. A second case involved Fateha.com, a site purporting to be the genuine voice of Singapore's Muslim community. The authorities threatened to charge its editor with criminal defamation for articles critical of senior establishment figures, but he fled to Australia before investigations were complete. More recently, two young Chinese Singaporeans were convicted under the Sedition Act for hate speech against the minority Muslim community. Although Singapore's Internet regime can hardly be described as liberal, the government's claim of 'light touch' regulation is not entirely hollow either. Ten years after the public Internet was introduced, no political site has been blocked, even though this would be a technically and administratively straightforward move. Singapore's approach stands in sharp contrast to that of China, where thousands of sites are blocked, and dissidents using the Internet have been arrested and made examples of (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Zittrain and Edelman 2003).

Calibrated coercion and 'good' governance

Critiques of coercion often operate with binary categories, as if authoritarian rule were an on/off switch. Such a mindset sees little need to distinguish between, say, physical torture and economic coercion, since both are instruments of domination that violate individual freedom. One such leap was made by *The Optical*, a dissident Singaporean online newsletter, when it suggested that the Mugabe regime's behaviour in Zimbabwe was reminiscent of the PAP. Circulating a BBC report on Zimbabwe that made no mention of Singapore, the editors of *The Optical* topped off their posting with a headline that read, 'PAP tactics emulated elsewhere'. The editors added in their preamble: 'In fact, take away any reference to Zimbabwe in the report and you won't be faulted if you think it's about the control freaks in the PAP government and their stooges in the local media!' (*The Optical* 2004). Another international comparison, which received wide publicity, was the press freedom index of Reporters Without Borders (2005). This ranked Singapore at number 147 out of 167 nations. It was placed behind even Colombia (ranked 134), where, according to the same organization, 'armed groups, as well as corrupt politicians and druglords, continued their efforts to silence journalists' and where an average of five journalists are murdered each year. Singapore was also ranked behind Sudan (132), where six journalists were in prison in 2004, and where several journalists were arrested because Sudanese defamation law does not recognize truth as a defence. Singapore's low score was due to the lack of independent media, which the researchers seem to have treated as commensurate with the physical brutality meted out to journalists in countries clustered around it in the table.

However, there are surely meaningful moral distinctions to be drawn among different types of coercion. To say that self-censorship that arises from regulatory restrictions and commercial constraints is equivalent to the physical torture of journalists is to trivialize the gross violations of human

rights that occur in tyrannical regimes. Leaving aside moral arguments, the conceptual reason for distinguishing between various degrees and types of coercion is that they have different political effects. As noted in our review of the literature on repression and dissent, how rulers use force affects the response they get from the ruled, which in turn affects the power they hold. This is why polemical comparisons of Singapore's press system to those of more violent regimes are inadequate. Like all authoritarian governments facing minimal legislative and judicial checks, Singapore's executive branch has seized sweeping powers to deal decisively with challengers. Catch-all laws give wide latitude to ministers, and the Constitution provides little protection to civil rights. These features of the Singapore system are nothing unusual. What is more unusual is that, even as it maintains and updates its arsenal of coercive powers, the Singapore government appears to have committed itself to the principle of strategic self-restraint, calibrating its coercion to get the job done with as little force as necessary.

The benefits of calibrated coercion have been apparent to various scholars ranging from critical theorists such as Foucault to researchers studying conflict resolution. First, calibrated coercion minimizes the sense of moral outrage that could be used to mobilize the public against the state. Second, calibration reduces the salience of coercion, making consensus seem like the sole basis for stability and thus strengthening hegemony. Third, calibrated coercion preserves incentives for economic production and wealth creation, which rulers need as much as do the ruled. Unfortunately, coercion is not an aspect of governance that leaders talk about, so it has not been possible to confirm just how conscious and deliberate Singapore's calibrated approach is. The government's official position, stated in reply to a newspaper article written by this author, is that 'the Government does not depend on "calibrated coercion", but derives moral authority precisely from what Dr George himself acknowledged – "an outstanding record in delivering the goods, internal discipline, ability to win genuine freely-given loyalty from the majority of Singaporeans" (Chen 2005).

Lee Kuan Yew's two-volume memoirs, similarly, say little about coercion. However, interviews with Lee have provided the occasional, fleeting insight into his thinking about the subject. One came in the wake of political instability in neighbouring Malaysia, where Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had neutralized his erstwhile deputy, the charismatic and popular Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's arrest and a beating in custody, from which he sensationally emerged with a bruised face, sparked protests the likes of which had not been seen for decades. Interviewed by reporters, Lee, then Singapore's senior minister (SM), did not join the international chorus of condemnation or question the Malaysian prime minister's motives, but instead put it down to an error in the choice of coercive instrument. According to *The Straits Times*:

> SM Lee said that Dr Mahathir had made several errors of judgment in handling his former protégé's case. Among these was arresting the

politician under the Internal Security Act shortly after his dismissal from government in September 1998.

When they met in Davos in January 1999, SM Lee asked Dr Mahathir: 'Why did you arrest him under the ISA?'

And he told me he did not know that Anwar was going to be arrested under the ISA. The Police chief had acted on his own authority.

'It never should have been that way, it should have been a straight-forward criminal charge.'

The next disaster was the assault on the jailed politician by former top police officer Tan Sri Rahim Noor. The Malaysian leader said that he would not have obtained any benefit from an assault on Anwar.

'I agreed, but these are things that have been done and I am afraid he has paid very dearly for it. My sympathies are with him.'

(Pereira 2000)

The content of a similar conversation, this time looking back at the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, was related by Lee in an interview with *Time* magazine. According to Lee, he said to the then-premier of China, Li Peng:

When I had trouble with my sit-in communist students, squatting in school premises and keeping their teachers captive, I cordoned off the whole area around the schools, shut off the water and electricity, and just waited. I told their parents that health conditions were deteriorating, dysentery was going to spread. And they broke it up without any difficulty . . . [Y]ou [China] had the world's TV cameras there waiting for the meeting with Gorbachev, and you stage this grand show.

(Quoted in Elegant and Elliott 2005)

Li Peng's answer, as reported by Lee to the *Time* correspondents, was 'We are completely inexperienced in these matters.' These two exchanges show Lee's appreciation of the need for restraint in the exercise of repression. From his reports, it appears that the leaders of Malaysia and China did not disagree with the principle, but had had difficulty implementing it.

If indeed calibrated coercion is recognized by rational authoritarian rulers as a governance skill required for the consolidation of their power, this raises the question of what it takes for the state to acquire and apply this skill. Drawing from the Singapore case as well as the theoretical literature, certain prerequisites may be surmised. First, leaders are more likely to calibrate their coercion the longer the time frames of their decisions. If they are interested only in the short term – like roving bandits, invading armies with no interest in holding the territory, or political leaders who expect to be ousted before long – there is less reason to curb their rapacious instincts. If, on the other hand, one takes the long-term view, the benefits of calibrated

coercion, coupled with the building of ideological consensus, become much more relevant. This is related to the confidence one has in one's monopoly of power, as Mancur Olson points out in his example of the Mafia family. The PAP exemplifies the paradox that a dominant party, after solidly entrenching itself through illiberal means, can generate self-enforcing limits to its use of coercion in order to further consolidate its power. This logic may also apply to China, Vietnam and other countries with dominant or monopolistic parties.

Second, calibrated coercion may be possible only after a period of totalizing, and possibly brutal, repression. The PAP's 'light touch' media controls would not be sufficient if they were not part of a total approach, which consigns not the just the press but also universities, trade unions, business groups, civil society organizations and opposition parties to subordinate positions in politics. Without such a comprehensive approach, challenges would appear through the cracks of a kind that would invite a more repressive response. For example, radical trade unions could publish organs that were significantly more critical than the output of the controlled media organizations. The 'light touch' regime also works because of the memory of the heavy hand. Media practitioners and other potential opponents treat the subtlest political signals seriously because experience tells them not to doubt the authorities' preparedness to use greater force if less is not enough.

Third, there must be tight civilian control over the instruments of coercion, namely the military and police. Without such control, there will be cases of brutality and harassment that backfire on the state, such as the black eye that Anwar Ibrahim received from the Malaysian police while in custody. In Singapore, there are close ties between the largely conscript uniformed services and the political elite. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and other members of his cabinet were inducted from high-ranking positions in the military. However, the military as such has little political clout. Armed forces chiefs are changed every few years, offering them no chance to build an autonomous power base. Domestically, the army is viewed as a benign and professional force that helps to organize national celebrations, for example. As for the police, cases with possible political fallout are handled delicately. Activists and politicians who have been called to police interviews generally report that that they are treated politely. Even the feared Internal Security Department is reported to have refrained from any roughhouse tactics in its interrogations of suspected terrorists, apparently to avoid losing the hearts and minds of Singapore's Muslims.

Fourth, calibrated coercion is a dynamic process of creatively adapting regulations to suit recent experience and changed circumstances. While most authoritarian governments would be content with the kinds of reserve powers with which the PAP came into office, the PAP treats these reserve powers as a costly last resort. Its media policies reveal its determination to devise new tools that nip challenges in the bud, quickly responding to new technologies and new sources from which opponents can mobilize resources. In devising

new frameworks of control, the PAP has also understood that calibrated coercion is most effective through instruments that the public assumes are outside of the ruler's control – in particular the invisible hand of the market, and the anonymous workings of technology. The PAP has been able to avoid frequent and visible coercive intervention in the media by structuring the newspaper market and the architecture of the Internet in ways that predetermine the range of possible outcomes, which are then attributed to commercial or technological realities. The PAP has accomplished this by confidently embracing both market forces and new technology, recognizing that – contrary to naïve libertarian arguments – that neither necessarily poses a threat to political control.

The PAP is certainly unusual in its capacity to practise calibrated coercion. It may even be unique. Singapore's small geographic size greatly helps the PAP achieve tight control over armed uniformed services and other institutions that are potential opponents. Singapore's economic success also makes the PAP better placed than most authoritarian regimes to exercise calibrated coercion. The literature on violent dissent and repression tells us that both are tempered by rapid and equitable economic growth. Singapore continues to enjoy low unemployment and a high standard of living, reducing the social cleavages around which violent discord could develop. The PAP thus appears to have benefited from a virtuous circle of increased stability and material comfort, reduced repression and dissent, and strengthened hegemony. Thus, it is unclear whether other states would be able to apply calibrated coercion as adeptly as has Singapore. What should be clear, however, is that the consolidation of authoritarian rule requires states to give due regard to applying self-limits on the use of violence. In turn, scholars of comparative politics need to appreciate – intellectually at least – the variations and complexities in the application of coercion.

Note

1 Responding to the author in *The Straits Times*, the Singapore government stated that it 'does not depend on "calibrated coercion", but derives moral authority' from good governance, adding that the PAP 'has won every election since 1959 because it enjoys the trust and support of the people, governs in their interests, and involves citizens in the large issues that affect us all' (Chen 2005: H7). The government's letter was in response to the author's op-ed article 'Managing Civil Disobedience' published in the same newspaper (10 October 2005, p. 19).

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