

Machiavelli's Tiger: Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore's Authoritarian Regime

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*Between being loved and being feared, I have always believed Machiavelli was right.
If nobody is afraid of me, I'm meaningless.*

Lee Kuan Yew, 6.10.1997

Introduction

'History', observes Adorno, 'is the unity of continuity and discontinuity'. Even a basic awareness to this reality should be enough to prevent anyone – especially the new sojourner into the realm of political science – from making coarse comparisons between past and present. And yet, sometimes the picture is so compelling, so painfully clear, that it simply cannot be ignored. Faced with it, all one can do is carefully explore the contours of the ancient and the new, hoping to retain enough responsibility to open his eyes to the differences when they manifest themselves.

This is what the current paper sets out to do. Though hundreds of years and thousands of miles stand between 16th century Italy and 20th century Singapore, between the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli and the statecraft of Lee Kuan Yew, the similarities are extraordinary. This paper will argue that the political views and actions of Singapore's ruling elite – more precisely, those of the country's 'founding father' Lee Kuan Yew – can be powerfully interpreted through an application of Machiavellian principles. This interpretation takes place on two levels. First, the political actions of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) can be shown to consistently reflect Machiavelli's prescriptions for maintaining an authoritarian regime, diffusing discontent and crushing opposition. Singapore is a country where human rights have come to be seen as nonessential in the race towards national economic excellence. Riding on the wave of modernity and capitalism, the government provides its citizens with welfare at the cost of chaining their lives and minds. The opposition has been reduced to dust by political imprisonment, structural control of the election process, and governmental defamation lawsuits that turn any utterance against the authorities into an act of political suicide. Subduing the population to a comfortable life of self-censorship, Lee and his aides can be seen as devout disciples of the Florentine.

But the comparison goes deeper than that. It can be argued that Lee's leading ideology of 'Asian values' – which underlies the PAP's policies – is a form of Machiavellian Virtù, seen as creating a healthy and dynamic community which can grow and prosper. Just as Machiavelli, in Isaiah Berlin's view (1972:288-9), set Roman Virtù in opposition to his contemporary Christian morality – thus Lee can be seen as having chosen Asian values for Singapore as an alternative to the West's liberal democracy. Lee himself, in this sense, can be seen as assuming the role of the

Machiavellian ‘lawgiver’, anointed by his virtuous character to overcome Fortune and the difficulties imposed by its blind whim. Also of note in this context is Lee’s selective use of the Confucian religion to justify his worldview.

These two layers of convergence will be explored in the following pages. I will conclude by examining the prospects for democracy in Singapore, through an interpretation of Machiavelli that emphasises his exceptionalist position.

Asian Virtù

Until his retirement from Prime ministry in 1990, it could be safely said that Lee Kuan Yew *was* Singapore. Since its first years of self-rule under British supervision, Lee has profoundly molded Singapore’s politics, economy and society. Following a short-lived merger with Malaysia, Singapore entered its current incarnation as an independent republic in 1965, and by that time Lee had secured his position as its undisputed chief (George, 1973:71). In the last decade, from his influential position as Senior Minister, the city-state’s founding father continued to hold a great deal of influence on the country’s policies and international image (Zakaria, 1994:110). Released from the duties of everyday government, Lee began in the 90’s to extensively discuss what is here argued to be the basis for a Machiavellian interpretation of Singapore’s regime – his background ideology of ‘Asian values’.

Lee has stated that there is a ‘fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts’ (qtd. in Sen, 1997:34; see also Jones, 1994:2). The core of this difference is that Singaporeans have ‘little doubt that a society with communitarian values, where the interests of society take precedence over that of the individual, suits them better [than democracy]’ (qtd. in Bell, 1997:16). Singapore’s current Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, has stated that

For success to continue, correct economic policies alone are not enough. Equally important are the noneconomic factors – a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and hardworking people, strong moral values and family ties. The type of society determines how we perform. It is not simply materialism and individual rewards which drive Singapore forward. More important, it is the sense of idealism and service born out of a feeling of social solidarity and national identification. (qtd. in Mendes, 1996:3)

These descriptions strongly echo interpretations of Machiavellian Virtù, especially that forwarded by Berlin (1972:287-9). To him, Virtù can be seen to consist of ‘inner moral strength, magnanimity, vigour, vitality, generosity, loyalty, and above all public spirit, civic sense, dedication to the security, power, glory, expansion of the *patria*’. Just as Machiavelli preferred these pagan virtues to his contemporary Christian morality, Lee Kuan Yew has preferred Asian values to the West’s democratic systems. For Machiavelli, Christian mores ‘are insuperable obstacles to the building of the kind of society that he wishes to see; a society which, moreover, he assumes that it is natural for all normal men to want – the kind of community that, in his view, satisfies men’s permanent desires and interests’ (ibid., 290). For Lee, in like manner, democracy and individual rights are just as injurious:

The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a

well- ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy.

(Lee, qtd. in Zakaria, 1994:111)

This is also highly reminiscent of Machiavelli's claim that a population 'well regulated by laws will be stable, prudent and grateful' (Discourses II, 58). Singapore former foreign minister S. Rajaratnam – very much a part of the PAP's early core – actually mentioned Machiavelli's notion of *Virtù* when speaking of Singapore's inner solidarity (Latif, 1997:3). Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean diplomat and writer, is another prominent spokesman for Asian values. He contends that they include 'attachment to the family as an institution, deference to societal interests, thrift, conservatism in social mores, and respect for authority' (qtd. in *The Economist*, 1998). Asians are also said to prize consensus over confrontation, and to emphasise the importance of education.

Another factor in this community-oriented value system is Lee's emphasis on success and merit. 'His philosophy was simple: "The greatest satisfaction in life comes from achievement. To achieve is to be happy. Singapore must be imbued with this spirit"' (Cooper, 1998:8). It should be noted, though, that Lee did not define achievement as a personal process, but instead as one that was viewed through the leadership and development of the country as a whole. Personal achievement, then, was also subjugated to the ideal of the achievement of the country. One is expected to 'love his *patria* more than his soul' – as Machiavelli himself claims to do (qtd. in Chabod, 1958:141), forget private wrongs for its sake (Discourses III, 47), and be willing to venerate it over his own consideration (Discourses III, 41).

Invoking Asian values, Lee and other Singaporean leaders have often contrasted the presumed social and economic decay in the West, supposedly as a result of the emphasis on individual rights and adversarial politics, against a socially cohesive and duty emphasising East Asia (Sen, 1997).(*1) Singapore's government claims only to be providing the people with what they need, while questioning the existence of universal human rights and rather presenting them as a Western set of values that do not necessarily hold true for Asia.

[Lee] is not sympathetic to Western governments who have failed to stem the worst social abuses and extreme indulgences... 'I truly believe the process is Darwinian', he says, 'if adopting Western values diminishes the prospects for the survival of a society, they will be rejected'... As far as Asia goes, its problems and vulnerability on the road to riches mean, in Mr. Lee's view, that Western liberal ideas are inappropriate. Individual rights will simply get in the way of social progress. Do not indulge them.

(Jones, 1994:3)

If Singapore became a Western-style democracy, Lee has said, 'we'd go down the drain; we'd have more drugs, more crime, more single mothers with delinquent children, and a poor economy' (qtd. in Bell, 1997:2) This, it can be argued, is analogous to Machiavelli's critique of the social convictions of his own time. For when he notoriously writes that 'it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to maintain

himself, to learn how not to be good', and that 'some things which seem virtues would, if followed, lead to one's ruin' (The Prince, 15) – he is contesting the fundamental assumptions of his time as to human and social nature (Skinner, 1981:37-8). In the same manner, Lee is attacking 'those truths held self-evident' by the democratic West: equality, freedom of speech and so on. He is not advocating a tyrannical regime that simply ignores these values. He is rather suggesting, ostensibly in clear conscience, an alternative worldview that holds other truths self-evident. In this view, the West refuses to accept the legitimacy of Asian values only because it cannot accept East Asia's rapid progress, and the fact that a so-called 'psychological revolution is taking place in East Asia as Asians recover from their colonial past and discover they can do things as good as, or even better than, the West' (Mendes, 1996).

A key element in support of Lee's Asian values ideology has been the integration of Eastern philosophies that supposedly advocate them, as well as the acceptance of an authoritarian rule. To this end Lee has publicly forwarded a view of Confucianism as an Asian tradition that supports his values, and has acted to establish it as Singapore's leading doctrine (Sen, 1997:34). Using a selective reading of Confucianism, Lee has emphasised certain parts of it while rejecting others. The authoritarian potential of Confucianism is well manifest:

Confucianism was definitely aimed at the restoration of a rationalised feudal order, with clear gradations of rank, at the time when the feudal system of the Chou Dynasty was breaking down...[an order] based on love for one's kind and respect for authority.

(Yutang, 1938:13-14)

Other important features of Confucian belief emphasised by Lee have been the importance of family life and the need for a competent and intellectual upper class that would 'govern by example' (ibid., 21-23; Bell, 1998:6,19). For example, Confucius said that there are five duties of universal obligation: 'between ruler and subject, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and those in the intercourse between friends' (Yutang, 1938:117). Another illustration of this is the often cited Confucian maxim 'Xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia', which offers counsel toward the ideal of 'great peace under heaven'. The ultimate goal in Confucian political philosophy, as stated in this aphorism, is to bring peace under heaven (pingtianxia). To do so, one must first be able to keep one's own household in order (qijia), which in turn requires that one cultivate 'self' (xiushen). This teaching is a political philosophy that ties together individuality, family and community – but can be interpreted in varying ways (Kim, 1994:190). Lee thus can be seen to have recognised the necessity for a relatively acceptable moral message or value system, that could be utilised to challenge the struggles that might occur as a result of industrial development. The adaptation of Confucianism and Asian Values thus gave Lee a foundation from which he could limit the level of challenges to his leadership.

But this interpretation of Confucian ideals was highly selective, and often intentionally perverse (Beng, 1995:28-31). And as Sen notes (1997:34),

[T]he reading of Confucianism that is now standard among authoritarian

champions of Asian values does less than justice to Confucius's own teachings...Confucius did not recommend blind allegiance to the state. When Zilu asks him 'how to serve a prince,' Confucius replies: 'Tell him the truth even if it offends him.' The censors in Singapore or Beijing would take a very different view.

As a result, it appears that Lee's application of Confucianism was not a direct reflection of his personal perspective or his desire to integrate its principles, but instead an extension of his desire to utilise religious ideology as a tool for manipulation. This clearly stems from a Machiavellian view, elaborated extensively in the Discourses (I, 11-15). Lee's reference to Confucianism can be seen as a form of 'resorting to divine authority' – adhering, for example, to Machiavelli's dictate that

[It is] the duty of princes and heads of republics to uphold the foundations of the religion of their countries, for then it is easy to keep their people religious, and consequently well conducted and united. And therefore everything that tends to favour religion (even though it were believed to be false) should be received and availed of to strengthen it.

(Discourses I, 12)

Beyond the actual content of Confucian religion, its very antiquity and embeddedness in the lives of many Singaporeans has served as an instrument of legitimisation. Lee adopted the premise that in order to warrant the greatest success in leadership, it is necessary to recognise the cultural factors that have defined a people for many years. Traditional behaviours are thus seen to represent the passions and worldly developments of a culture, and this demonstrates the foundation for society and the foundation for culture essential to effective leadership. Machiavelli wrote: 'to see a nation keep the same customs for a long time...also makes it easy to know future things by past' (Discourses, III, 43). As a result, religion and social institutions had to be maintained by Lee in order to create the kind of continuity that fostered loyalty. Traditional views also help leaders hold their position because they promote a means of contextualising an individual's actions, and inducing him to recognise leaders 'as lords' and to 'hold them in natural affection' (The Prince, 17).

Beyond the 'societal' Virtù of Asian values, there is another important facet of Machiavellian Virtù present in Lee Kuan Yew's leadership. His actions in the early days of independence, it may be argued, fit in with the rôle of the 'founder and lawgiver' described in the Discourses. This rôle is manifest, firstly, in Lee's 'mastery of fortune' through prudent action, and secondly in the fact that he held the Singaporean project entirely in his own hands for a long time, and subsequently passed it on to a carefully pre-trained elite.

The 1960's were a period of restructuring that required consideration of specific political and economic changes that Lee put into place in Singapore. After an unsuccessful two-year attempt to solidify the relationship with Malaysia, Singapore seceded from the federation in 1965, and took on its status as a sovereign state with Lee at the helm. The separation left Singapore isolated and in need of a definitive strategy to improve both internal loyalty and political stability (George, 1973:89). At a time when many thought Lee must turn his focus inward, Lee's view of the declining economic conditions pushed him to pursue foreign investments and he travelled

extensively to make business connections with the United States, Europe and Japan (ibid., 94-9; 164-7). 'Foreign funds complemented the development of government linked corporations and helped create the nation's modern economy. Lee developed a first world infrastructure in a third world region, lifting standards of administration, health, education, communications and security' (Cooper, 1998:8).

It can be argued that in taking the situation in hand and creating his country's own future, Lee's actions were exemplary of what Machiavelli described as a leader's *Virtù*. Machiavelli's description was linked to the sense that activity, especially activity that can bring both honour and glory to the leadership of a country, was one of the most beneficial and necessary acts of a leader (Berlin, 1972:285).

More specifically, Machiavelli argued that men who were able to make their own fortune, to create their own luck, or to bend fortune to their side were individuals capable of demonstrating *Virtù*. Machiavelli recognized that not all of the issues that man faces are under his direct control, and that it is necessary to be flexible, to demonstrate an understanding of those things that cannot be controlled, and then to take action in alignment with factors that can be controlled in order to create the greatest gains (Discourses III, 9). In another famous passage he writes:

[I]t may be true that fortune is the ruler of half of our actions, but that she allows the other half or thereabouts to be governed by us...it is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman, and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it has been seen that she lets herself be conquered by the bold rather by those who proceed coldly.

(The Prince, 25)

The difficult road to independence, the problems with Malaysia and the subsequent economic downturn were clearly factors that could not be directly controlled, but Lee's decision to take forward steps, to assess the situation and create a plan for change, was the action that would meet with Machiavelli's concept of a leader's *Virtù*. Because virtuous men are also self-reliant and able to demonstrate self-affirmation, even in the midst of economic, political, or social downturns, Lee's ability to make his own fortune, to secure international investors and create internal economic improvements are the actions of a such a man.

Additionally, Lee's strong clench on all aspects of Singapore's development in its early years can be seen as fitting Machiavelli's observation in his chapter concerning the glorious founders of nations:

[I]t never or rarely happens that a republic or monarchy is well constituted, or its old institutions entirely reformed, unless it is done by only one individual; it is even necessary that he whose mind has conceived such a constitution should be alone in carrying it into effect. A sagacious legislator of a republic...should concentrate all authority in himself.

(Discourses I, 9)

As Machiavelli notes (Discourses I, 20), when the lawgiver ages and passes on his authority it should be to successors holding *Virtù*, rather than to heirs of his lineage. Lee has done this too, aiming to identify those who can provide 'the direction, planning and control of power in the people's interest':

Singapore's brightest students [are] groomed for future command.... The ideal product is the student, the university graduate, who is strong, robust, rugged, with tremendous qualities of stamina, endurance and at the same time with great intellectual discipline and most important of all, humility and love of community. (qtd. in Bell, 1997:20)

Lee can therefore be seen as embodying Machiavelli's notion of the founder and lawgiver of a republic.

The Iron and the Velvet

Under Lee's leadership, Singapore enjoyed an economic growth of 8.5% before the Asian financial crisis, with a current average *per capita* income of \$26,300 (CIA, 1999). Lee himself has been described as 'the Thomas Jefferson of the Pacific Rim', 'the most lucid and powerful intellect of any English-speaking leader of the second half of the century', and 'Asia's Moses' (The Economist, 1996).

But there has been a price.

Behind the façade of economic progress – indeed, under its pretext – the Lee government had put into effect a policy of rigorous internal repression. Systematic destruction of political opposition and suppression of the trade union movement were the outstanding features of this policy. Simultaneously, as if to round it off and ensure the total effect, the government also completely 'officialised' the education system, beat the mass media into subjection and instituted other programmes aimed at casting a generation of Singaporeans in a carefully prepared mould.

(George, 1973:110)

Having explored, in the previous section, the way in which Machiavellian concepts underlie the basic ideology of Lee and his successors – it is now time to see how Machiavelli has affected the regime's real-life practices in the everyday management of Singapore. This will be discussed in two respects: measures toward the opposition and measures toward the populace.

After assuming office democratically and solidifying his position, Lee Kuan Yew began a campaign intended to destroy his adversaries for rule of the city-state. His tactics in treatment of his political opposition could have been compared to attacking a mosquito with an atomic bomb.

First under the rationale of battling an alleged Communist conspiracy, and later in defence of Singapore's economic advancement and independence, Lee established a tight regime of control and violence. For example, early in the year of the 1963 elections, he used his power under the British Internal Security Act to imprison 100 key members of the pro-communist Barisan Sosialis party (which had split from his own PAP), later releasing and co-opting them into administrative positions with no real political power (George, 1973:68-9). This, from Machiavelli's point of view, was a partial mistake. Not only does he say that 'a republic should take great care not to entrust with an important administration one who has been gravely offended' (Discourses III, 17), but he also holds that

Princes...will never be safe as long as those live whom they have deprived of their possessions...old injuries can never be cancelled by new benefits, and the less so when the benefits are small in proportion to the injury inflicted.

(Discourses III, 4)

But then again, wholesale killing of political adversaries is not such a comfortable possibility for a post-World War II leader, who wishes to engage in fruitful economic relations with the West. Machiavelli would acknowledge that states should do their best to ‘change [their] mode of proceeding’ and ‘modify their institutions to suit the changes of the times’ (Discourses III, 9) – including modes of repression. Later on, when even imprisonment became unfeasible, Lee and the PAP refined their methods, and a new item was added to the arsenal: wholesale defamation suits. This episode is so illuminating that it deserves to be narrated at length. Following the 1997 elections,

Worker's Party candidate Tang Liang Hong faced lawsuits filled by 11 different members of the PAP, including Prime Minister Goh and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Mr. Tang was said to have defamed by saying they lied when calling him ‘an anti-Christian Chinese chauvinist’ [during campaigning]. Worker's Party veteran J. B. Jeyaretnam faced eight defamation suits fled by the PAP. He was disqualified from parliament for five years after being found guilty in 1986 of making a false declaration relating to party funds...Singapore’s opposition leader, Dr. Chee Soon Juan, has not escaped such injuries as well. Since joining the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) in 1992, he has lost his job, his house, his car and his savings. Following dismissal from his university job – for ‘misusing’ expenses – Dr. Chee was sued for disputing accusations about him relating to the sacking. He and his wife had to sell their house to meet the S\$500,000 in costs and damages. He has been called a cheat, a compulsive liar, and a traitor. [In 1997], he and three colleagues were fined S\$51,000 for presenting inaccurate healthcare data to a parliamentary committee. And just before the poll, the party lost a S\$120,000 defamation suit.

(Nadel, 1997).

The success of these policies has caused many of Singapore’s opposition members to flee the country and continue their campaign for democracy abroad. The PAP has taken this into consideration:

To ensure that such individuals do not use their time overseas to build up their political strength to pose an effective challenge to the regime, a ten-year time limit has been legislated. Singaporeans who stay away for more than ten years from the Republic will automatically have their citizenship revoked.

(Gomez, 1999a:6)

Ironically, by substituting lawsuits for imprisonment the Singaporean elite has remained deaf to one of Machiavelli’s famous warnings: that ‘above all things [the prince] must keep his hands off the property of others, because men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony’ (The Prince, 17). Machiavelli also sees the faculty of accusation in a republic as a means for resolving disputes among the citizenry, not as a means for governmental control (Discourses I, 7).

In any case, Lee Kuan Yew has been aware of the need to limit drastic measures against the opposition. While holding that a government needs harsh means in order to govern, he has noted that ‘we don’t have to use it often. Use it once, twice, against

big people. The rest will take notice' (qtd. in Bell, 1997). This clearly represents two of Machiavelli's counsels: the first is that useful cruelties are those 'which are perpetuated once for the need of securing one's self...injuries should be done all together, so that being less tasted, they will give less offence' (The Prince, 8). The second is that repressive action should be focused on 'the great', for 'when they are not bound to you of set purpose and for ambitious ends, it is a sign that they think more of themselves than of you; and from such men the prince must guard himself and look upon them as secret enemies' (Ibid., 9). This will also help to 'avoid incurring such universal hatred' as may be held against one by the people as a whole (Discourses III, 9; The Prince, 17).

But actions against specific political opponents are not enough. Structural means are necessary as well, for as Machiavelli observes,

There is no better nor easier mode in republics...for successfully opposing the ambition of any citizen, than to occupy in advance of him those ways by which he expects to attain the rank he aims at...[thus] depriving him of the weapons which he himself employed with so much skill.

(Discourses I, 52)

And indeed, the Singapore government has made sure that even those opposition members who remain in the race cannot gain any power. An examination of the PAP's continuing control over parliament shows this clearly (Data: Gomez, 1999a:3):

Year	Total Seats	Occupied Seats		% of Seats	
		PA P	Opposition	PAP	Opposition
1963	51	37	14	72.5	27.5
1968	58	58	0	100.0	0.0
1972	65	65	0	100.0	0.0
1976	69	69	0	100.0	0.0
1980	75	75	0	100.0	0.0
1984	79	77	2	97.5	2.5
1988	81	80	1	98.8	1.2
1991	81	77	4	95.1	4.9
1997	83	81	2	97.6	2.4

These results far from reflect the will of the people. General elections have been held in western garb, but they are only ostensibly free. Lee and the PAP have made sure that whatever is left of Singapore's opposition would face their complete command over the election process. As Gomez (ibid.) notes, 'Gerrymandering, the short notice given for the re-drawing of electoral boundaries, the timing of the elections and other strategic law-making gives the ruling party much advantage'.

It can also be argued that by using these means, Lee recognised the need for deceit to complement direct force when dealing with his opposition. This may be compared to Machiavelli's famous counsel to rulers – to alternate between the rôles of the fox and the lion (The Prince, 18). Also of note is Machiavelli's observation that [F]orce alone will [n]ever be found to suffice, whilst it will often be the case that cunning alone serves that purpose...Nor do I believe that there was ever a man who

from obscure condition arrived at great power by merely employing open force; but there are many who have succeeded by fraud alone.

(Discourses II, 13)

Supplementary to these structural impediments on opposition activity is a strong atmosphere of dependence that enables control of the voters themselves. 'A wise prince', writes Machiavelli, 'will seek means by which his subjects will always and in every possible condition of things have need of his government, and then they will always be faithful to him' (The Prince, 9). Machiavelli would argue that in order to determine effective leadership and maintain conformity, it is necessary first to determine what a collective of men might want, and then apply these things to the ideals and focus of the country. Because man is drawn by needs and by his desire for personal gains (Discourses I, 37), the use of these to maintain an authoritarian rule is highly utile.

Government-built and managed housing estates are the homes of more than 80 per cent of Singaporeans. During the campaign leading to the January elections, senior government officials pointedly warned voters that precincts that elected opposition candidates would have the lowest priority in government plans to upgrade public housing facilities (U.S State Dept., 2000). Considering a similar step in 1985, Lee stated in Parliament: 'I make no apologies for it. As a PAP government we must look after PAP constituencies first because the majority of people supported us' (qt. in Bell, 1997). As Dr. Chee observes,

In Singapore, there are so many things that the government controls, not just the housing. Businesses need government-approved licenses. The government has link to a vast range of companies, everything from shipping to child-care. Even [members of] the wealthy middle-class are looking over their shoulders. Unfounded or not, fear among the Singaporeans is very significant.

(qtd. in Nadel, 1997:3)

These are the velvet gloves covering the Singapore government's iron fists: it has intentionally nurtured the dependency of its citizens in its welfare systems, ranging from state-controlled housing to compulsory pension plans, which place about 40 percent of total labour earnings into the hands of government managers (Lingle, 1996:*syn*). The process began parallel to Singapore's independence: Lee's implementation of a five stage plan for industrial development and economic changes in the country was met with relative support, based primarily on the fact that the plan addressed some of the basic concerns of the general population, including the need for economic changes, the need for jobs and the problems of education and housing (George, 1973:100-6). But the benefits bestowed upon the people remained tightly controlled, following Machiavelli's recommendation that 'in well-regulated republics the state ought to be rich and the citizens poor' (Discourses I, 37). (*2)

Fear is another key to the PAP's control over Singapore. Lee, after Machiavelli (The Prince, 17), has professed to this unequivocally (see p.2 above). Nevertheless it must be noted that the fear underlying the life of Singaporeans is a dim one, based much on allusions and rumours than on actual threats or bloodshed. This is, again, a sign of the times: political apprehension in an ostensible democracy is exacted by

more subtle means than in an outright dictatorship. In the words of opposition head Chee, unfounded or not, fear among the Singaporeans is very significant...[In the 1997 elections] the ballot papers were serially numbered and some Singaporeans were absolutely terrified that their vote can be traced back to them. I don't believe the Government would do this. But the fear of it affects us in a major way. Right now everyone is so fearful.

(qtd. in Nadel, 1997)

The PAP not only controls the Army, the Judiciary, the Union Movement and the Police Force – it also has a control of people's mouths. Since 1957 the party has had an inner cadre, the members of which comprise perhaps less than 5% of the total party membership and operate under close supervision at all levels of political activity (Buchanan, 1972:283). Its membership is secret, creating an incessant sense of surveillance: on one can be sure that he is not speaking to a party boss that will later have action taken against him. There is also open surveillance by the Internal Security Department (ISD), which agents are visible during opposition party activities (Gomez, 1999b). This is again with Machiavelli:

[T]he institutions of the state should be so regulated that the influence of citizens shall be founded only upon such acts as are of benefit to the state, and not upon such as are injurious to the public interests or liberty. (*3). And therefore attention must be given to the means employed by the citizens for acquiring such influence...if one such transgression were allowed to go unpunished, it might lead to the ruin of the republic, for it would be difficult to force back the ambitious to the true path of duty. (Discourses III, 28)

The tight control of the media in Singapore is infamous, including the closure of papers in the early 1970's, and the Printing Press Ordinance that required all publishers to receive a permit, annually renewed only under the implicit condition of their adherence to content control (George, 1973:147-155). But perhaps the most unique aspect of Singapore's lack of freedom of speech is its stalwart grip on political culture. 'The people help perpetuate the very structural features that support restrictions against alternative political expression', writes Gomez (op.cit.), analysing Singaporeans' self-censorship:

[T]he PAP has articulated through its actions a set of political out-of-bound markers over and above the constitution and keeps it vague...any attempt, whether by an individual or group, to create political space – an uninhibited area for political articulation – has the effect of causing great uneasiness among much of the population...alternative political views are essentially seen by the majority to be strictly adversarial to the ruling party and likely to carry political consequences. 'When each begins to think of his own danger, [people] become cowardly and feeble' (Discourses I, 57).

Self-Censorship (an email exchange)

----- Original Message -----

From: Uri Gordon <uri_gordon@hotmail.com>

To: Lee <machiavelli@pacific.net.sg>

Sent: Saturday, February 19, 2000 11:35 AM

Subject: Singapore and Machiavelli

> Hi,

> I came across your address while researching the Internet for a paper I'm writing on Machiavellian Politics in Singapore. Since you appear to have something to do with both the writer and the country, I am naturally interested in asking whether you have made the same connections as I have. It seems to me that the Singaporean government fits Machiavellian writings in its maintained control of the opposition and populace, as well as in its ideology of Asian values that is similar to Machiavelli's 'Virtu'. Have you any thoughts on the subject?

> Uri Gordon, Israel

From: "Lee" <machiavelli@pacific.net.sg>

To: "Uri Gordon" <uri_gordon@hotmail.com>

Subject: Re: Singapore and Machiavelli

Date: Sun, 20 Feb 2000 15:49:54 +0800

Tidings,

Strange that you should find me this way. I have studied and am somewhat in awe of Niccolo Machiavelli's literature, but we (Singaporeans that is) do not enjoy discussing the pertinence of that to our leaders and their political agendas.

We are largely a one party system and the rationale behind that has been that there is no space in such a small island for there to exist more than one dominant party. The ruling party (i.e. People's Action Party) justifies this with the results that they have garnered for the country (not quite developed by OECD standards but almost there). There are undercurrents... that is true of any political system. But I am not at liberty to speak of them.

Francis Lee,

Singapore

Conclusion: Prospects for Democracy

The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate the extent to which Lee Kuan Yew and other Singaporean leaders have conceptualised politics, and acted in them, as Machiavelli would have recommended. By creating a continuity between Lee's ideological premise of Asian values and the notion of Virtù in Machiavelli's works, it has been asserted that both men rejected the predominant worldview of their time, in favour of another value system which they deemed more suitable for politics. Asian values and Virtù have also been shown to intrinsically have much in common. Subsequently were explored the points of convergence between the methods of Singapore's PAP government in maintaining control of the opposition and the people, and Machiavelli's observations and counsels. A perfect correlation can never exist, but it is hoped that by now there has emerged a clear picture of the Machiavellian imprint on Singapore's politics.

But then again, *is* there indeed such a thing as Machiavellianism? Or has this entire undertaking done nothing more than search for a patch of blue in the sky, since Machiavelli's insights should be seen as the foundations of political science in general, and therefore as applicable to *any* regime, country or leader? And has it not been

argued that authoritarianism is not inexorably what Machiavelli had in mind, and that he should rather be seen as a forerunner of republican patriotism? (for a discussion of both themes see Burnham, 1943:pt.II).

This is confusing. It is time to take sides:

[E]ven if we were forced to grant that Machiavelli was essentially a patriot or a scientist, we would not be forced to deny that he was a teacher of evil...We thus regard the simple opinion about Machiavelli as indeed decisively superior to the prevailing sophisticated views...[but] precisely if we are forced to grant that his teaching is diabolical and he himself a devil, we are forced to remember the profound theological truth that the devil is a fallen angel. To recognise the diabolical character of Machiavelli's thought would mean to recognise in it a perverted nobility of the highest order.

(Strauss, 1958:11)

As a rule, one should read Strauss between the lines for a 'hidden but inescapable' message. Here, it appears to be the analytical approach that holds that Machiavelli's particulars are *not* the essential, inescapable 'laws of motion' that govern efficient politics anywhere and 'anywhen'. They are rather a distinct set of descriptions and prescriptions that are there to be *chosen*. An enduring and consistent choice to adhere to them may be seen as constituting Machiavellianism – a term that in deed has a distinct meaning of its own and that is not in any sense synonymous with 'politics' (see also Butterfield, 1940:89-113; Mansfield, 1996:219-230).

If it is held that Machiavellianism is there to be chosen, then it is unavoidable to ask whether this choice is arbitrary, or rather made within certain conditions. In my positive answer to this question I will follow Laski (1968:250-251), who contends that Machiavelli is not a philosopher of everyday politics, but rather the master of exceptionalism:

The thesis, in fact, that Machiavelli lays down holds only when the conditions are extraordinary in character. Political success in a period of instability will always belong to the able and unscrupulous adventurer who is careless of the means by which he reaches his goal...Wherever men feel passionately that their end is so great that it is useless to count the cost, there will be found, consciously or unconsciously, a disciple of Machiavelli.

Therefore, even if we were to acknowledge that Machiavelli laid down the eternal rules for such exceptional periods with consummate insight, we could still contend that they are relevant to such an age only. This is the crucial point: if there exist specific background conditions for a choice of Machiavellianism, then under other conditions Machiavelli's 'gospel of death' (*ibid.*, p.262) may become unnecessary.

These analyses in mind, some closing remarks can be made as to the prospects of democracy in Singapore. The very choice of subject implies that democracy and individual freedoms are here seen as positive for Singapore. From this clearly follows a refusal to accept Lee's claim that Asian values will always fit his country better. For Machiavellianism was indeed a choice on his part, fitting to extraordinary conditions. Only later did Lee begin to rationalise it through Asian values – a theory that was not

fully elaborated until the last decade. Now that the country has achieved stability and economic prosperity, none of these policies are indispensable. Democracy will do just as well, if not better:

Where a whole people participates in political life, where the sense of interest in the political drama is widely diffused, and the education to understand it as wide as the interest, most Machiavellian axioms are, *a priori*, at a discount...Government by discussion engenders a capacity for self-regeneration that no other system, however powerful in appearance, can pretend.

(ibid., p.256)

Nor are Lee's premises unavoidably dictated by Asian culture. The heritage of many nations in the continent has democratic potential, including interpretations of Confucianism that emphasise the reciprocal relations between government and citizen, not only the subject's loyalty to his ruler. In the words of Kim Dae Jung – once dissident and today president of South Korea – Asia's anti-democratic values are a myth (Kim, 1994:1).

In this context, there has recently been an interesting attempt to formulate a communitarian democracy for Singapore. This would include an institutionalisation of free elections, open government that would not enact repressive measures, and an active participation of the populace in determining the common good – through an active civil society, free speech and independent press – rather than having it dictated by the authorities (Beng, 1995:194-99).

Realisation of this potential is still far, but not impossible. Ironically, it can be accepted by the forgivingly 'republican' interpreters of Machiavelli and by his most vehement opposers alike. Democracy can still have the final word in the shining city on the Straits of Malacca.

Footnotes

1. There is, of course, no such thing as Asian values - at least not as an all-embracing ideology that has independent existence outside Lee's framework. In a continent where 60% of the world's population lives (and even within East Asia alone) one must expect a great deal of diversity and reject any affirmation of a predominant worldview. Furthermore, as Kim (1994) and Sen (1997) convincingly argue, many elements of Asian tradition and history can be interpreted as promoting freedom, self-development and democracy - not Lee's authoritarian formulations.

2. There has been good evidence showing that much of Singapore's high per-capita income is due to resident businesses, and that much of the population is still under the Western standard of living (See Lingle, 1996). An earlier study (Buchanan, 1972) has shown that the kind of progress Singapore had achieved in its first years was strictly within colonial terms of reference, with the country mainly serving as a proxy for the western penetration of Asia. This mode left the exploitive character of, and the serious imbalances in, the economic system basically untouched (in this context see Discourses I, 55).

3. Machiavelli's notion of 'liberty' here is the liberty of the entire community, its freedom from the influence of external forces - not the individual liberty of the citizens. He takes for granted that where there is Virtù in a community there is also

solidarity, so that personal interest is identified with 'public good' (see Skinner, 1981:51-5).

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