

Causal Layered Analysis: Deconstructing Singapore's 2015 General Election

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Abstract

In explaining social phenomena, students are taught to explicate the causal mechanism between independent factors and a dependent outcome. However, this could lead to a superficial analysis of the phenomenon if students were to focus on precipitating factors. Hence, this paper contends that JC students should be exposed to complementary analytical approaches in order to transcend conventional frames of analysis. Inayatullah's (2004) "Causal Layered Analysis" (CLA) could be an appropriate method to encourage students to unpack surface-level factors by drawing out their underlying and deeper causes. The CLA comprises four levels of analysis: the litany (precipitating causes), social causes (systemic causes), discourse/worldview (ideational causes) and myth/metaphor (core narratives). This can be illustrated by applying CLA to Singapore's GE2015, which would suggest that the electorate's voting patterns are not just the outcome of varied precipitating factors, but also the product of the existing political system and ideas about the nation-state.

Strands: Innovative ideas & approaches, Pedagogy, Issues

In humanities and social studies education, students are often taught to identify key factors that explain social

phenomena in order to put forth an argumentative position. This approach is useful for imparting students with the skills to explain and elaborate on the causal logic between the factor and the argument, but could lead to a superficial understanding of the phenomenon if the student solely focuses on precipitating factors. Hence, this skillset should be complemented with critical thought to ascertain the different levels of causation for a more in-depth analysis. This paper contends that the "Causal Layered Analysis" (CLA) by Sohail Inayatullah could be a useful toolkit for students to educe the deeper causes from the surface-level ones. Inayatullah (2004) conceptualized the CLA as a research methodology to deconstruct an existing social reality into "different levels of reality and ways of knowing" in order to transcend the "conventional framing of issues" (p. 18). He posits that there are four levels of analysis: the litany, social causes, discourse/worldview, and myth/metaphor. The *litany*, "the unquestioned view of reality" or the precipitating factors, can be further explained by underlying systemic causes at the *social causation* level. In turn, the *social causes* are legitimated by deeply held *worldviews* and "discursive assumptions" that are expressed by *metaphors or myths*, which provide "a gut/emotional level of experience to the worldview under inquiry" (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 8). In other words, the CLA could be operationalized by posing a

series of questions. *What are the immediate/precipitating factors that caused this phenomenon? Are there any systemic (political, social, economic, and historical) factors that enabled it? What are the justifications/rationales for this arrangement? Are there any core narratives or metaphors that reproduce the rationale?* Although CLA is ultimately geared towards policy issues to effect change, the manner in which it deconstructs social phenomena could be instructive for critical analysis.

The CLA model could be particularly useful for students to unpack any given superficial perception of existing social reality. This can be illustrated by deconstructing the 2015 General Election (GE2015) that saw the Singaporean electorate overwhelmingly voting for the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) government with a near 10% swing from the GE2011. This unanticipated outcome triggered numerous political commentators to offer their insights into explaining this phenomenon. Among these commentaries, some factors that stood out include the effects of SG50 celebrations, the passing of Lee Kuan Yew, "fear of a freak election," discrediting of the Workers' Party's integrity, climate of global uncertainties, and the policy redresses of the PAP (*The Straits Times*, 2015). These factors, in turn, can be organized into 3 categorical reasons: *Timing*, *Fear* and *Responsiveness*. Yet, these factors are merely the precipitating causes that could be reframed to account for their underlying systemic causes, which would better explain the renewed electoral dominance of the PAP. By adopting a systemic perspective, it would be evident that the varied precipitating factors are products of the existing illiberal political system that is designed to entrench the dominance of the PAP and their control over the polity. This system, in turn, is

legitimated by the worldview of the majority of Singaporeans that only the PAP can ensure the viability of Singapore, and constantly reinforced by core narratives that speak of her vulnerabilities.

Systemic perspective: Dominant one-party system

It is important to first examine Singapore's political landscape, which has been carefully fashioned by the PAP government, in order to ascertain a *social causation* level of analysis of the GE2015. Only by situating the precipitating causes within their political context can the underlying social causes be elicited. Hussin Mutalib (2004) characterizes the nature of the political system as "illiberal democracy" or "soft authoritarianism." By virtue of its "unitary state structure;" a unicameral parliament with more than two-thirds majority in favor of the PAP; and the Cabinet (executive branch) made up entirely of PAP Ministers that enforces "strict party discipline," he argues that hegemonic power is vested within that single party (p. 318). Hence, under this dominant one-party system, the PAP government "assumes a central and activist role" in determining Singapore's political landscape, only tolerating a weak opposition rather than their institutionalization within the state structure (Mutalib, 2004, p. 318). According to Cherian George (2010), this centralization of political power in the executive, without an institutionalized check-and-balance, coupled with the relative openness and connectedness to various strategic nodes in the society has resulted in a "networked autocracy" that entrenches PAP's domination over the polity. Through creative legislative measures to constrain the political space of opposition parties, and simultaneously propagating the notion that an unconstructive opposition is inimical to

the national interest, the PAP has uninterruptedly dominated electoral competition (Mutalib, 2004). The PAP has also dominated the public sphere through means of coercion, co-optation and corporatist reconfiguration to discipline various civil society groups and parapolitical institutions—state bureaucracy, grassroots organizations, trade unions and mass media—in favor of the party line (George, 2010). In turn, this has implications on Singapore’s political culture, which tends to lend itself to an apathetic and subject electorate, which would rather leave the politicking to the PAP and instead focus on their short-term material interest that are mainly “bread and butter” concerns (Mutalib, 2009). Consequently, it is unsurprising that PAP’s dominance has become an entrenched political reality in Singapore that reproduces itself one election after another.

The Litany: Timing

Having discussed the existing political reality, it is now pertinent to contextualize the precipitating causes of the GE2015 voter-swing (in favor of the PAP) in order to derive their underlying causes. The first precipitating factor that contributed to this phenomenon is the *timing* of the election. The incumbent government’s term after the GE2011 was set to expire in January 2017, yet Singaporeans were called to the polling stations more than a year in advance on 11th September 2015 (Reuters, 2015). Political pundits have commented how GE2015 could not have been invoked at a time any sweeter than this, particularly due to a confluence of these factors: SG50 celebrations, national mourning for Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), and the Workers’ Party (WP) Aljunied—Hougang—Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) saga. In his analysis, Tommy Koh (2015) notes that 2015 was “not an ordinary year” as it

marked Singapore’s 50th year of Independence and was met with a year-long SG50 celebration. As part of this celebration, there were over 400 “ground-up projects” that were funded by a \$10 million government fund and the most extravagant National Day Parade organized hitherto (Tham, 2015). According to monthly surveys of the SG50 Programme Office of those Singaporeans surveyed, more than 80% believed that the celebrations “brought the nation together,” evoking a deep sense of nationalism and patriotism (Tham, 2015, n.p.). Adding to these sentiments was the passing of LKY on the 23rd March of the same year, which evoked a period of national remembrance. Singaporeans publicly made known their gratitude and respect for the founding father, crediting him for Singapore’s success and survival over the last 50 years. According to Koh (2015), the risen sentiments of nationalism, patriotism and gratitude resulted in transference of public goodwill onto the PAP. He also suggests that the goodwill was augmented by the loss of WP’s credibility over the AHPETC issue, which alleged the mismanagement the Town Council’s accounts and left “voters in doubt” over the party’s “competence and integrity” (Ng, 2015, n.p.) The allegation was highlighted and drawn out by the PAP right up to September 2015, the election month (Ng, 2015). Hence, it can be argued that the convergence of these precipitating causes resulted in an auspicious *timing* for the PAP government. There could be no better time to call for election given that public opinion was at its strongest in favor of the incumbent. While the precipitating causes explain *why* the timing was ripe for the PAP, it glosses over the underlying mechanisms that explain *how* it came about in the first place. How exactly did they translate into a favorable outcome for the PAP?

Social Cause: Regulated Para-Political Institutions

The litany, *timing*, should be reframed to take into account the underlying cause—the PAP’s control over para-political institutions—that allowed the precipitating factors to translate into electoral support. Public sentiment over the SG50 celebration, LKY’s passing and the AHPETC saga were mediated and framed by the PAP-controlled mass media. It has been well established that the PAP has co-opted the mass media by controlling it through an attuned “press control regime” that effectively tasked it with a political role of supporting the government and “maintaining the status quo” (Tey, 2008, p. 895). By considering this system in place, it can be argued that the PAP was successful in capturing the minds of the masses through the constant deluge of articles and videos that hyped up LKY (and PAP’s) contribution to the nation. The narrative of SG50 campaign and the LKY memorial was framed by the pro-PAP news media, essentially indoctrinating the masses with a key political message: Singapore has survived the last 50 years because of the PAP, without which there may not be another successful 50 years. The narrative of the AHPETC saga was also clear: the opposition is untrustworthy and only the PAP has the credibility and legitimacy to govern. Moreover, the SG50 celebration was assumed by pro-PAP grassroots organizations through the People’s Association. Kenneth Tan (2003) has argued that “Singapore’s grassroots sector” is a para-political institution insofar as they make up “organizations that are explicitly political in nature” or are “ultimately linked administratively to the government,” functioning as tool for the PAP government to mobilize mass support and socialize them to PAP’s causes (p. 4). Hence, it can be argued that the nationalistic feelings and

goodwill generated may not be wholly spontaneous, but strategically cultivated by the PAP government through their existing control over the para-political institutions. In other words, the *timing* factor could not have translated to a positive voter-swing if not for the illiberal political system.

The Litany: Fear

The second apparent factor for the positive GE2015 result is *fear*. Emboldened by the events of GE2011, greater criticism from “netizens”, and massive turnout at their rallies, the disunited opposition parties expected a greater share of votes and “contested all 89 seats for the first time since Independence” (Mutalib, 2015, n.p.). Tommy Koh (2015) called this a “big mistake” that allowed the “PAP to warn against a freak election” (n.p.) Moreover, widespread speculation on social media, and the circulation of whatsapp messages on “bookie odds” that predicted WP wins only served to heighten the irrational fear generated in the minds of the voters (Han, 2015). In turn, this shows that performance legitimacy is still concentrated in the hands of the PAP government and voters do not believe that an alternative government would be viable. In fact, this perception was bolstered by the global climate of uncertainties. “The PAP’s narrative about the terrorist threat from ISIS and the uncertain global economy” played right into the fearful minds of the electorate that believes that only the PAP has the ability to manage these threats (Koh, 2015, n.p.). Nevertheless, these factors explain why *fear* bolstered PAP’s support, but ignore why *fear* had to come at the expense of the opposition parties.

Social Cause: Opposition Weakness

The *fear* factor has to be reframed to

account for the diminished political space of opposition parties, which is the basis for the perception that an alternative government is not viable for Singapore. The weakness of opposition parties in Singapore is inherent given their political marginalization by the incumbent government. Although many Singaporeans do want to see greater opposition in Parliament, they overlook the systemic impediments in place that were designed to entrench PAP dominance and constrain the effectiveness of opposition parties. Mutalib (2009) argues that the PAP government has attacked opposition figures over the years with creative “verbal and legal onslaught” that often bankrupted them. He suggests that elected opposition representatives are not afforded the same “rights and privileges” given that para-political institutions discriminate them from access and support. Also, through gerrymandering and other constitutional changes the PAP government has diminished the necessity of opposition parties by instituting participation from other sources of alternative views such as Nominated Member of Parliament (Mutalib, 2009). It is more than evident that the odds are stacked against the opposition parties and they will necessarily remain weak so long as the systemic impediments are in place to secure PAP’s political dominance.

The Litany: PAP’s Responsiveness

The final reason why the PAP regained its popular support was its *responsiveness*. According to Tommy Koh (2015), the PAP government had accurately discerned the main policy issues that were not well-received by voters in GE2011: transport breakdowns, housing crunch, and liberal immigration policy. From the very start of their term, the PAP had apologized to the electorate for their mistakes and commenced various policy redresses. In addition, he

commented that the PAP had the foresight to introduce new initiatives, such as the Workfare [scheme] and Progressive Wage Model, to abate concerns over rising inequality. He further highlighted the The Pioneer Generation Package, MediShield Life, and the Silver Support Scheme that were introduced to pander to the ageing population, which made up a large part of the electorate. The *responsiveness* of the PAP through their policy redresses and new initiatives was welcomed and accordingly rewarded by the voters. Koh states that, “the electorate, which is fair-minded, has therefore decided to reward the PAP for having listened to its concerns and for responding to them (n.p.)” This, in turn, insinuates that the GE2011 swing against the PAP was in fact the electorate punishing the PAP for its mistakes. Does that then imply that Singaporeans have no other avenue for participation than to make their grievances known through protest votes?

Social Cause: Constrained Political Space

Therein lies the underlying cause for the *responsiveness* of government, a diminished political space for Civil Society and a resultant “subject” political culture. As a result, the PAP has to rely on vote-swings as a measure of their governance. Cherian George (2010) notes that the “government is especially vigilant at the border between individual expression and more organized dissent (p. 127)” He argues that the PAP government while encouraging individuals to “express their grievance” through regulated channels such as newspaper’s letters pages, government feedback channels, personal blogs and discussion boards, quashes potentially dangerous social organization of dissent through existing laws. Hence, there is no avenue for interest articulation within the realm of Civil Society,

except for isolated expressions of grievances on social media. This constraint necessarily supplements the “subject” political culture in Singapore, “where citizens, while knowledgeable about politics, prefer to leave politics to the state” (Mutalib, 2009, 85). The electorate, thus, only vent their frustration over “bread and butter” concerns without taking concrete steps to effect political change. This could best explain why Singaporeans believe that their only recourse may be at the polling stations to best capture the PAP’s attention. In other words, they want the PAP to listen to them and take the necessary remedy actions, but not to replace the party entirely or undermine its entrenched dominance.

Worldview & Metaphors: Singapore Cannot Survive without The PAP

Through the process of reframing precipitating factors to account for underlying systemic causes, the worldview of the Singaporean electorate might have already become apparent. Singaporeans fundamentally believe that only the PAP can ensure the prosperity of the nation and therefore should not be ousted. Tommy Koh (2015) identifies the “bottom line” of the electorate as the continued dominance of PAP as the government despite their want for a credible opposition. This worldview

legitimizes the subject political culture of the electorate and gives the PAP a broad political space to experiment with the system without losing their dominant position. Ironically, the worldview of the electorate seems to mirror the PAP’s. Hussin Mutalib (2005) conceives the PAP’s worldview to be the “belief...that only a regulated society with its own brand of democratic ethos, which emphasizes the economic imperative and communitarian leanings, can deliver stability and prosperity to the state” (p. 317). The confluence of worldviews would then suggest that the discourse is shaped and reinforced by national myths or metaphors that are constantly produced and reproduced. Metaphors like “little red dot” and “tiny island” are used to remind citizens of the vulnerabilities of the nation-state and a need for a strong government to sustain its success. Phyllis Chew (2000) provides a rigorous analysis of the metaphors used by our political elites, Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, that speak of “danger and vulnerability” for the nation to the point of fashioning a “crisis mentality” since her separation from the Malaysian Federation. These narratives of insecurity and vulnerabilities were reproduced in the SG50 Celebrations and video messages aired during the LKY mourning period, as argued previously.

Figure 1: Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

Level of Analysis	Current Reality
The Litany	Timing, Fear and Responsiveness
Social Causes	Effects of the One-Party Dominant Political System
Discourse/Worldview	Singapore cannot survive without the PAP

Myth/Metaphor	A vulnerable ‘Little Red Dot’
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In sum, it is apparent that the CLA model is useful to elicit the deeper causes for the PAP’s renewed dominance in the GE2015. *What are the immediate/precipitating factors that caused this phenomenon?* The timing of the election, the fear of a freak result that ousts the PAP, and the responsiveness of the PAP to voter concerns led to an overwhelming mandate for the incumbent PAP government. *Are there any systemic (political, social, economic, and historical) factors that enabled it?* The PAP’s control over para-political institutions, state-engineered shrinking of political space for both the opposition parties and civil society groups, and the “subject” political culture of Singaporeans inevitably contributed to the conditions in which the precipitating factors were able to play out in ways favorable to PAP. *What are the justifications/rationales for this arrangement?* Singaporeans fundamentally believe that it is essential for the PAP to form the government in order to ensure effective governance geared towards prosperity. *Are there any core narratives or metaphors that reinforce the rationale?* Singapore is constantly portrayed as a vulnerable country, given her geographic location and global interdependencies, which requires a trade-off between political freedoms for economic prosperity and social stability.

If this causal layered analysis were accurate, it would be easy to predict that every election that takes place within this entrenched political reality would result in an electoral dominance of the PAP. The only variable will be the margin of the swing-votes aimed at “punishing” the PAP government without undermining their

dominance. Even the GE2011, the worst election performance for the PAP, resulted in a dominant 60% mandate. Some have viewed such carrot-and-stick and tit-for-tat voting patterns positively. Chan Heng Chee (2015) believes that the Singaporean electorate is “rational, pragmatic and fair” and it “will use their vote strategically to push for the outcome they wish for.” Pragmatism aside, such voting patterns have adverse implications for Singapore’s march towards democratization. It is an indication of a backward and “subject” political culture with democratic symbolism, short of civil participation in the democratic process. As long as such “pragmatism” shall prevail, citizens shall not see themselves as masters of their political life but as subjects of an aristocracy. For there to be any meaningful change in the voting patterns of the electorate, there has to be considerable effort aimed at rewriting the core narrative of Singapore in order to reshape the Singaporean worldview. Otherwise, even if there were to be some form of liberalization to the illiberal system, the majority of Singaporeans would still be apprehensive to conceive of an alternative government.

Therefore, the CLA model could be an invaluable toolkit for students to conceive of a social phenomenon beyond the superficial causal mechanisms. This was illustrated with the deconstruction of GE2015 results to educe the deeper causes. At the same time, by unpacking the precipitating factors in this manner, it would become much easier for students to make a valued judgment over the implications of the phenomenon and possible recommendations to better the predicament. While such in-depth analysis may not be necessary for students at the

secondary school and pre-university level assessment, Junior College students should nevertheless be exposed to such modes of critical thought in preparation for their academic career in higher education institutes.

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