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Singapore's National Day Rally speech: A site of ideological negotiation

Kenneth Paul Tan 

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Abstract

This article analyses the inaugural National Day Rally speeches of three Singapore prime ministers. It locates these speeches in the continuous ideological work that the People's Action Party (PAP) government has to do in order to maintain consensus and forge new alliances among classes and social forces that are being transformed by globalisation. Increasingly, these speeches have had to deal with the contradictions between nation-building and the tensions between the liberal and reactionary tendencies of the global city. It is argued that such a situation has made it futile for the government to attempt a straightforward ideological mobilisation of the people into a relatively homogeneous national community. The PAP government's ideological struggle to forge consensus has been balanced by a strategy of divide-and-rule. Ironically, the rally speeches have been as much about dividing as they have been about uniting.

Key words:

Notes

¹ Chong cited my paper (Tan, [2001](#)) as an example of the “patriarchal state” approach. While this is not the place to engage in extended debate, I contend that he misunderstood the central thesis of the paper. Rather than arguing, as Chong claimed, that the state has become feminised, that is to say, “softer” in its approach to governance, my paper actually suggested that the “patriarchal state” has shifted from the more brutal and coercive emasculation of civil society in the 1960s to 1980s, towards a partnership with civic society actors, where the state continues to assume the “masculine” or “husbandly” voice of reason and control, while the latter are restricted to “feminine” preoccupations like welfare (care), the arts (expressiveness) and dialogue (communication). True to “patriarchal” form, any hysterical outbursts in civil society or attempts by its actors to meddle in politics will be met by condescension, ridicule, reprimand or even punishment.

² This and the next two paragraphs are based on parts of a public lecture that I delivered on 16 August 2004 for the Political Science Association (Singapore) at the National University of Singapore.

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