Remaking Public Participation: The Case of Singapore

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Abstract
This paper discusses public participation or active citizenship embodied in the Remaking of Singapore and Singapore 21 documents. It looks at the extent public participation has been incorporated in two of Singapore’s latest policy initiatives; the Integrated Resort and the Increase in Ministerial pay. The paper highlights that participation in Singapore, is “pseudo” or “partial” in character. It is guided by existing authoritarian structures and prevailing societal norms; structures and norms that have been shaped by years of People’s Action Party (PAP) led involvement in the economic, political and social spheres. Under such circumstances, efforts at active citizenship and public participation would at best be gradual; an exercise that is highly contingent on the dynamic accommodation of state authority structures with that of the larger society.

Keywords: Public participation, Remaking, Policy initiatives, Authoritarian structures, Prevailing societal norms.

1. Introduction
Singapore’s transformation from an economic backwater to a thriving nation needs little introduction. For the last forty odd years, it has raked in accolades and has continued to defy critics; critics that questioned the ability of a 647 sq km city state with no natural resources to survive let alone become one of world’s success stories. There is no short of views in describing Singapore’s development and leadership. Austin (2001) views strong governance with high doses of pragmatism on the part of its leadership as key determinants of Singapore transformation (Austin, 2001). The state was pragmatic in its choice of development policy, the bureaucracy was fully socialized into developmentalist values, and the public acquiesced for the sake of this national vision and project (Koh, 1998). Chan (1975) describes Singapore as an administrative state whose leadership’s immediate preoccupation post independence was about employment and maintaining or improving, political, social conditions. Mauzy & Milne (2002) view the state and its leadership as authoritarian in nature arguing that although Singapore has most of the trappings of democracy – parliamentary system of government, elected president, universal suffrage and regular and free election, certain draconian laws, controls on political participation, and measures limiting civil and political rights and freedom of the press, mean that Singapore is, to some extent, an authoritarian state.

Since the late 80s and especially after the hand over of leadership from the old to the new guards, Singapore leadership has been attempting to take a “softer” approach - a more participatory approach - when it comes to decision making. Shifting societal expectations and changing political economy has prompted its leaders to regard participation as an important ingredient in the new Singapore. This paper however view that a more participatory Singapore, is still at a nascent stage. Taking cue from various conceptual frameworks, the paper will highlight that the participatory posture of the Singapore leadership needs constant retooling, one where existing authoritarian structures and norms of the ruling elite need to take into account shifting acceptance level of acceptance of authority of the larger society.