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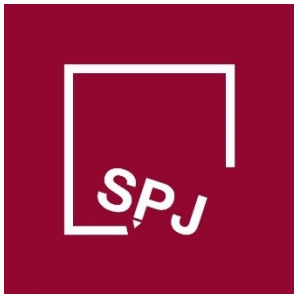

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Foreword

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I am delighted to write the Foreword for this issue of the Singapore Policy Journal. The articles published here are rich and varied both in terms of content and method. They deserve to be of interest not only to those with particular interests in issues relating to Singapore, but also thinkers working in the field of public policy more generally. The articles are thoughtful without being polemic, and are constructive without being sycophantic. They are highly readable, including to those not specialist in the field.

One of the major themes which emerges from the various discussions in this issue is context. It is commonly observed that Singapore creates a unique context; policy will need to reflect this. A number of authors in this issue observe this idea and run with it. For instance, in her discussion of the increased rates of divorce in Singapore, Abigail Liew identifies that macro-picture changes can have an impact on the realities of domestic life. As a result, she considers that solutions to the problem of divorce are not necessarily divorce-specific, such as providing more counselling to couples. Instead, the answer may be to seek to address seemingly wider pressures on spouses which provide the backdrop to relationship breakdown. This takes the form particularly of policies which facilitate both spouses to participate in work life.

Understanding context means appreciating history, and historical method is an important aspect of Isaac Chan Wai Yan's discussion of the mandatory death penalty for certain drug importation offences in Singapore. Underlining the role of history through reference to Marie Antoinette's final words before her execution, Chan nevertheless closely scrutinises the reasons given for the current position, and suggests a blueprint for potential development of the law in this field. That said, Chan argues that transplanting a Western-style drugs policy would be insufficiently nuanced to the Singapore context. Singapore is relatively young as a sovereign state. It has seen change through much of its life, in terms not only of its external relations, but also of the relationship between the state and its citizens. The continued evolution in this relationship is the subject of Jia Xuan Tan's article on Singapore's "social compact", and the Forward SG agenda. Tan discusses the relationship between government and governed in Singapore, and describes Forward SG as an "experiment in participatory governance". However, the suggestion is that Forward SG should be viewed not as an endpoint, but as an aspect of continued development, including potentially in relation to distributive norms.

Ng Kang Qi turns to a major issue of method in policy-making: how to balance three objectives of meritocracy, equality of life chances, and the autonomy of the family. Drawing on work by James Fishkin, Ng identifies the risk of imbalance between these three aims. Using empirical method to

examine the position in Singapore, Ng argues that whilst Singapore prioritises meritocracy and the autonomy of the family, equality of life chances are uneven for Singaporeans. The approach taken hitherto was justified in Singapore's past, but there may be justification for prioritising equality of life chances in the future. Ng suggests that educational reform would lead to a more justifiable balance between Fishkin's objectives.

A particular educational reform is suggested by Juin Hsiung Ong: increasing the availability of means-tested public service scholarships. One of the justifications which Ong gives for this policy change is to address inequality of chance between Singaporeans of different backgrounds: it would achieve a great social benefit for those currently disadvantaged. But Ong argues that the benefits go beyond this. It would lead to other benefits such as a diversity of thought among those joining the civil service, increasing the extent to which the civil service is in touch with people, and reducing the prospect of scholars breaking their bonds.

The theme of enhancing equality of opportunity is also taken up by Tay Zhe Qian in an article concerning children born out of wedlock. In a period of increasing wealth inequality, the government has emphasised the importance of social mobility. Tay therefore considers that the time may be right to address the position of children of unmarried parents: unmarried mothers are generally low-earning. This presents a policy paradox: the government has strong reasons to promote that children be born within a marital home, but policy should not seek to disadvantage children who are not.

Balance is also a theme of Matthew Cheong's discussion of censorship and the arts in Singapore, but in a different way to that arising from the three articles considering equality of opportunity. Cheong notes that censorship of the arts may further exacerbate structural difficulties suffered by artists in Singapore, including in relation to market size. As such, a rebalance which meets Singapore's current (rather than historical) needs would be proportionate, including means of ensuring that artists do not self censor. Cheong recommends a toolbox of techniques, including sandboxes, structured assessment frameworks, and a system of advisory opinions.

Context, history, evolution, equality of opportunity, balance: these are all important elements of thinking about how the inevitable tensions in running a country should be managed in the 21st Century. These authors should be proud of what they have achieved in terms of making thoughtful recommendations for Singapore's future.

When I was asked to write this Foreword, the Editors will not have known that I am moving to Singapore in a few months to take up a position at Singapore Management University. Reading the articles in this issue of the Singapore Policy Journal, a publication based in Singapore and based in Cambridge, is therefore a lovely link between my current and future workplaces. It has been a pleasure to read them, and to think about the ideas of these young authors who have the best interests of Singapore at heart.

Rethinking censorship: building Singapore's arts capital

Matthew Cheong

Introduction

In June 2024, artist Sean Dunston painted a mural depicting a samsui woman smoking a cigarette over a Chinatown shophouse ("*Samsui Woman*"). However, this was not without criticism. A member of the public compared the mural to a prostitute, and Urban Redevelopment Authority ("URA") disapproved of proliferating smoking in a public space, initially demanding amendments to be made[1]. This controversy highlights the tension between Singapore's desire to grow its cultural capital and its conservative instincts. Thus, I seek to explain why censorship is worth rethinking, provide an overview of Singapore's censorship regime for prospective artists and evaluate the justifications of the regime. I argue that while Singapore's current censorship framework is historically understandable, the normative justifications grounding them do not perfectly reflect contemporary Singaporean society. To that end, I seek to suggest how Singapore might better balance its desire for censorship with its aim of creating an authentic and dynamic arts scene.

1. Why is Censorship Worth Rethinking?

1.1 Small market size creates a lack of demand

Censorship is not the only factor affecting the authenticity and dynamism of Singapore's art scene. One alternative reason is market size. While demand from private collectors who patronise fairs like Art SG have increased[2], Singaporean art may struggle to appeal to the everyday patron – in 2022,

[1] Channel News Asia, 'URA to re-evaluate stance over Chinatown mural featuring smoking samsui woman after public feedback' (Channel News Asia, 22 June 2024) https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/south-bridge-road-chinatwon-shophouse-mural-ura-samsui-woman-smoking-erase-reevaluate-4428581 accessed 7 November 2025.

[2] Lisa Movius, 'Singapore steps up: the Art SG 2025 fair hopes to ride a wave of optimism in the city state's art market' (The Art Newspaper, 13 January 2025) https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/01/13/singapore-steps-up-the-art-sg-2025-fair-hopes-to-ride-a-wave-of-optimism-in-the-city-states-art-market accessed 10 January 2026.

ticketing agency SISTIC sold only 60% of the arts event tickets they did in 2019[3]. This suggests that Singapore's art scene is struggling because there lacks sufficient demand for local art.

However, this subdued demand may equally be a function of censorship. Curator **Lianyi Wang** asserts that the perceived risk of censorship contributes to Singaporean art's anodyne character[4], as common subjects in contemporary art globally like race and religion are censored. This is not to assume that these topics reflect Singaporeans' everyday concerns; rather, the censorship framework might shape public preferences by foreclosing their engagement with challenging art. Indeed, the government's 2002 Censorship Review Committee survey found that 58% of respondents favoured some relaxation for free-to-air programming[5], suggesting public appetite is less conservative than presumed. Reapproaching censorship could therefore stimulate art that appeals to the public – at the ASEAN Youth Theatre Festival, a piece by Working Title that discussed unhealthy relationships with AI resonated strongly with the audience[6] – yet such pieces are not commonplace in Singapore's art scene.

1.2 Funding attempts to plug the demand gap are insufficient

Another reason is funding. Small organisations, which comprise 90% of Singapore's art ecosystem, are heavily reliant on government grants for their operations[7]. These include the Presentation and Participation Grant and Tote Board Arts Fund, which offer up to 70% and 50% project funding costs respectively and are both managed by the National Arts Council ("NAC")[8]. However, these amounts may be insufficient to cover production and operating costs[9]. As noted by artist-curator **Moses Tan**, who opened the independent arts space Starch, apart from receiving NAC grants for specific exhibitions, Starch is completely self-funded and only financially possible because his family owns the unit it is housed in[10].

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[3] Clairre Lau, 'The Singaporean Arts Scene is Straining, and Something's Gotta Give' (MAJU, 13 December 2025) https://www.maju.sg/post/the-singaporean-arts-scene-is-straining-and-something-s-gotta-give accessed 10 January 2026.

[4] Louis Ho, 'Taking the pulse of Singapore's burgeoning art scene in 2024' (STIRworld, 19 January 2024) https://www.stirworld.com/think-opinions-taking-the-pulse-of-singapores-burgeoning-art-scene-in-2024 accessed 10 January 2026

[5] Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, 'Report of the Censorship Review Committee 2003' (10 July 2003) https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/regulation-licensing-and-consultations/committee-reports/public_consultation-with-committees_crc2003.pdf accessed 10 February 2026

[6] Lau, 'The Singaporean Arts Scene is Straining, and Something's Gotta Give'

[7] Lau, 'The Singaporean Arts Scene is Straining, and Something's Gotta Give'

[8] Lau, 'The Singaporean Arts Scene is Straining, and Something's Gotta Give'

[9] Lau, 'The Singaporean Arts Scene is Straining, and Something's Gotta Give'

[10] Ho, 'Taking the pulse of Singapore's burgeoning art scene in 2024'

If lack of funding contributes so heavily to Singaporean artists' struggles, why is censorship a relevant concern? Without sustained demand, artists must rely on grants to break even. Further, former Singapore Art Museum curator **Khairudden Hori** notes that since most funding comes from the government, artists would struggle to engage in more challenging work if the body that supports it seeks to censor it[11]. Accordingly, censorship frameworks that accommodate artists' creative intentions might help cultivate a more vibrant arts scene.

2. Singapore's Censorship Regulatory Framework

Prospective artists face two dimensions in Singapore's censorship framework: subject-specific prohibitions and medium-specific licensing requirements. The former is substantive, identifying themes considered "out-of-bounds"; the colloquial term "OB markers" was coined by then-Minister of Information and the Arts George Yeo[12]. The latter is formal, regulating the exhibition of works through licensing.

This framework is governed by two regulatory actors: the URA and the Infocomm Media Development Authority ("IMDA"). The URA is Singapore's land use planning and conservation authority[13]: its censorship abilities are limited to granting artists permission to paint over conserved buildings. In contrast, the IMDA develops and regulates Singapore's infocomm and media sectors[14]. It exercises significantly broader censorship powers, including enforcing Codes of Practice and Guidelines for Media that regulate Singapore's media landscape across the arts, TV, games and film[15].

2.1 Subject-specific licensing

[11] Ho, 'Taking the pulse of Singapore's burgeoning art scene in 2024'

[12] James Rowlins, 'Out of Bounds: Freedom of Expression in Singapore Revisited' (New Naratif, 3 April 2019) https://newnaratif.com/out-of-bounds-freedom-of-expression-in-singapore-revisited/ accessed 7 November 2025.

[13] Urban Redevelopment Authority, 'About Us' (URA) https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/About-Us accessed 4 January 2026

[14] Infocomm Media Development Authority, 'Who We Are' (IMDA) https://www.imda.gov.sg/about-imda/who-we-are accessed 4 January 2026.

[15] Infocomm Media Development Authority, 'Codes of Practice & Guidelines – Media' (IMDA) https://www.imda.gov.sg/regulations-and-licences/regulations/codes-of-practice/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines---media accessed 7 January 2026.

Past enforcement decisions can illuminate the boundaries of permissible expression. While there is no closed list of prohibited subjects, the Undesirable Publications Act ("UPA") 1967 and Infocomm Media Development Authority ("IMDA") Arts Entertainment Classification Code provides the criteria for determining prohibited content. This includes content that undermines the public interest (UPA 1967, s 4(1)(a) and IMDA Arts Entertainment Classification Code, para 7) and matters of race or religion that can instigate hostility between racial or religious groups (UPA 1967, s 4(1)(b) and IMDA Arts Entertainment Classification Code, para 7). Some topics, however, routinely trigger regulatory intervention.

Race and Religion

Race and religion are treated as sensitive because ethnic or religious extremism can threaten public order and social stability[16]. Enforcement has included blocking Lai Ah Eng's attempt of publishing his thesis entitled "Meanings of Ethnicity" in Singapore[17], and the banning of the book "Red Lines" because it contained cartoons of Prophet Muhammad that denigrated Islam[18].

Political Discourse

Political expressions are similarly strictly regulated. Enforcement has included the banning of Catherine Lim's 1994 article which pitted the leadership styles of Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong together[19], and Tan Pin Pin's 2014 film "To Singapore With Love" for giving a distorted view of history despite consisting of interviews with political exiles[20]. Foreign relations are also out of bounds. In 2015, the IMDA sought the removal of Newsha Tavakolian's portraits of female Kurdish soldiers against the Islamic State because they risked "undermining public order, national security and/or

[16] Lai Ah Eng, 'Experiences with Censorship in Research and Publication on Singapore's Multiculturalism' (*IIAS The Newsletter, No 80,* Summer 2018) https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/experiences-censorship-research-publication-singapores-multiculturalism accessed 7 November 2025.

[17] Lai, 'Experiences with Censorship in Research and Publication'.

[18] Ministry of Home Affairs, 'MHA Statement in Response to Media Queries on "Red Lines"' (Ministry of Home Affairs, 12 January 2022) https://www.mha.gov.sg/media-room/newsroom/mha-statement-in-response-to-media-queries-on-red-lines/ accessed 10 February 2026.

[19] Tan Ping Yang, *Boundaries of Socio-Political Discourse in the Singapore Media: The Out-Of-Bounds (OB) Markers* (Honours Thesis, Edith Cowan University 2002)

[20] Patrick Frater, 'To Singapore With Love Banned in Its Home Country' (Variety, 10 September 2014) https://variety.com/2014/film/asia/to-singapore-with-love-banned-in-its-home-country-1201303250/ accessed 10 February 2026

stability"[21]. Since political legitimacy and diplomatic coherence are fundamental to Singapore's governance model, artworks that encroach upon them are significantly scrutinised.

Homosexuality

The IMDA's Arts Entertainment Code notes that social norms "should be recognised"[22], and this is well-illustrated by the trajectory of LGBTQ+ content. While what constitutes "recognition" is unclear, in requiring non-mainstream norms to be accompanied by consumer advice, "recognition" likely means "consistency" with social norms[23]. Following the repeal of S377A, the regulatory attitude towards homosexuality has softened, allowing for plays with homosexual themes like Joel Tan's *Tango* to be censor-free[24].

Vices

This is perhaps the most discretionary area of control. Despite Tang See Chim expressing hesitation on deeming publications undesirable on moral grounds during a 1967 Parliamentary Sitting[25], the *Samsui Woman* controversy demonstrates how moral considerations, such as stigma against smoking, continue to shape regulatory outcomes. This reflects a policy decision to maintain communal standards, and artists caught under this are advised to err on the side of caution.

2.2 Medium-specific Licensing

Licensing requirements for public art, performances and exhibitions serve as an administrative medium for imposing subject-based restrictions. While formally framed as permits, these processes allow the state to conduct content reviews prior to the presentation of artworks.

Public Art

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[21] Steph Harmon, 'Art v government in Singapore: "I fear once I leave, they will punish me"' (The Guardian, 9 September 2017) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/09/art-v-government-at-singapore-festival-i-fear-once-i-leave-they-will-punish-me accessed 3 November 2025.

[22] Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

[23] Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

[24] Harmon, 'Art v government in Singapore'.

[25] Parliament of Singapore, *Proceedings of Parliament on the Undesirable Publications Bill* (Parliament No. 1, Session No. 1, Volume No. 25, Sitting No. 16, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, 13 March 1967), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=012_19670313_S0004_T0009 accessed 10 February 2026.

This was the regulatory approach in *Samsui Woman*. Under its guidelines for making additions and alterations to conserved buildings[26], the URA imposes restrictions such as requiring permission for artworks on conserved buildings like shophouses (known as "Category 3 works") because they contribute to the civic landscape[27]. This reflects a policy choice to preserve artistic integrity in culturally rich buildings.

Performances and Exhibitions

Under the Arts Entertainment Classification Code, the IMDA must issue a license before any performance, play, art exhibition or concert can play in public[28]. By evaluating works based on their impact on public order, national security and stability and morality[29], the state employs an anticipatory form of regulation that seeks to minimise risk as opposed to actual harm caused.

2.3 Summary of Position

The central policy dilemma is between the desire to promote a vibrant and innovative cultural system while preserving social stability by regulating expression. **Ong Keng Sen** critiques the regime, describing Singapore as a "garden paradise" with hidden "landmines"[30]. While Singapore hopes to make its arts scene more vibrant, as evidenced by the "Our SG Arts Plan (2023 - 2027)"[31], decisions like *Samsui Woman* risk portraying Singapore as not open to new ideas (**Ong Whee Teck**)[32]. Resolving this tension requires an analysis of the normative foundations of Singapore's censorship regime.

3. Justifications for Censorship

3.1 Preserving Racial and Religious Harmony

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[26] Urban Redevelopment Authority, 'Additions and Alterations' (URA) https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Guidelines/Conservation/Additions-Alterations accessed 7 January 2026.

[27] Low Zoey, 'Smoking samsui woman mural to be retained in full, building owner fined for not seeking approval' (Channel NewsAsia, 10 July 2024) https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/samsui-woman-mural-smoking-chinatown-no-changes-building-owner-fined-4469331 accessed 7 November 2025.

[28] Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

[29] Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

[30] Harmon, 'Art v government in Singapore'.

[31] National Arts Council, 'Our SG Arts Plan (2023 – 2027)' https://www.nac.gov.sg/about-us/oursgartsplan accessed 8 November 2025.

[32] Ong Whee Teck, 'Commentary: The controversy over the samsui woman mural is not just about art' (Channel NewsAsia, 26 June 2024) https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/samsui-woman-mural-chinatown-cigarette-smoking-prostitute-art-culture-4434931 accessed 5 November 2025.

Singapore is proudly diverse, considering racial and religious harmony as vital for social cohesion[33]. This necessity justifies Singapore's censorship laws: **Ang and Nadarajan** stress that censorship is rooted in historical instances of racial and religious violence[34]. This includes the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots between the Malay and Eurasian communities over an ethnically Dutch girl raised by Malay parents[35], and the 1964 racial riots between the Malay and Chinese communities during a procession celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday[36].

However, this might be rooted in the past. Censorship on this ground seeks to prevent feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will or hostility between racial and religious groups (UPA 1967, s 4(1)(b)), yet the Internal Security Department notes that Singapore has not experienced large-scale communal unrest since the 1960s[37]. While such risks may still exist, they are arguably significantly more muted today. Instead, culturally sensitive artworks may instead foster greater cultural understanding.

3.2 Paternalistic Justifications for Moral Reasons

This top-down approach stems from a desire to ensure that content is sensitive to community standards of morality and decency[38]. And since this is of "community standards", the State's involvement in this area is justified because they are democratically elected, while artists are not[39].

Whether this ground is defensible depends on whether censorship authors can accurately represent community norms. The IMDA acknowledges the importance of social norms by requiring work to be consistent with them[40]. However, without any consensual metric that defines a "social norm", one

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33 Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Maintaining Racial and Religious Harmony' (MHA Singapore) https://www.mha.gov.sg/what-we-do/managing-security-threats/maintaining-racial-and-religious-harmony/ accessed 9 November 2025.

34 Peng Hwa Ang and Berlinda Nadarajan, 'Censorship and the Internet: A Singapore Perspective' (1996) *Communications of the ACM*

35 National Library Board, 'Maria Hertogh Riots' (National Library Board) https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=fbc266c5-4f6f-49d8-b77e-d37e20742087 accessed 9 November 2025.

36 Policy & Planning Division, Smart Nation & Digital Government Office / GovTech, 'Racial Riots (1964 and 1969)' (SG101) https://www.sg101.gov.sg/society/examples/racialriots/ accessed 9 November 2025.

37 Internal Security Department, 'Contending with Communalism' (Internal Security Department) https://www.isd.gov.sg/our-functions/contending-with-communalism/ accessed 11 February 2026.

38 Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

39 Tan, *Boundaries of Socio-Political Discourse*

40 Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

might only identify these norms through the public opinion, which has been critical of recent IMDA decisions. These include the 2024 refusal to release Daniel Hui's film *Small Hours of the Night* because it discussed poetry censorship[41], and the 2025 banning of Wild Rice's play *Homepar*, which depicted drug abuse[42]. The resulting controversy and increased interest in these productions on social media platforms suggest that the censorship regime may not reflect community norms entirely, weakening the credibility of the top-down justification.

3.3 State-building Reasons

Ang and Nadarajan note that information for business uses is often readily accessible, while information for non-business purposes like personal use is often restricted because they do not threaten the State as significantly[43]. This evidences how Singapore's censorship framework is justified by the need to promote economic performance and nation-building; **Tan** likens art as an instrument for national development[44].

However, Singapore is currently a wealthy nation renowned for its pristine image and should be able to take more liberties in celebrating its culture. Further, such censorship detracts from state-building by diminishing Singapore's cultural net-worth. At recent iterations of art fairs like ART SG and Singapore Art Week, many international patrons asserted that the perceived risk of censorship caused Singapore's cultural content to fall behind its infrastructure sophistication.[45]. A nation's art can strengthen its reputation internationally: Taiwan's continuous presence in the independent film scene has helped it build its "soft power" and international recognition both practically and symbolically[46]. Accordingly, censorship might have taken away, rather than contributed to, the building of Singapore's international attractiveness holistically.

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41 Patrick Frater, 'Small Hours of the Night,' Film About Censorship, Banned in Singapore, Cannot Be Shown at Festival (Variety, 1 November 2024) https://variety.com/2024/film/news/small-hours-of-the-night-film-censorship-singapore-1236197373/ accessed 12 January 2026.

42 Singapore pulls Wild Rice play Homepar for undermining anti-drug policy; theatre company rejects ban (Channel NewsAsia, 20 June 2025) https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/wild-rice-cnb-drugs-performance-banned-imda-ivan-heng-5193466 accessed 12 January 2026.

43 Ang and Nadarajan, 'Censorship and the Internet'

44 Tan, *Boundaries of Socio-Political Discourse*

45 Ho, 'Taking the pulse of Singapore's burgeoning art scene in 2024'

46 Tai Trinity, 'An Ally in the Arts: How International Independent Filmmaking and Film Festivals Enhance Taiwan's Visibility' (2025) *Global Taiwan Brief* Vol 10 Issue 16 https://globaltaiwan.org/2025/08/an-ally-in-the-arts/ accessed 11 November 2025.

4. Suggestions for Improvement

How, then, might the censorship regime be improved to ensure it accurately reflects Singapore's contemporary reality?

4.1 Why Leave Regulatory Ambiguity?

There is merit in the current regulatory ambiguity. As **Louis Kaplow** observes, ambiguity allows regulators to respond flexibly to the context of the artistic work[47]. Bright-line rules risk being "gamed" by artists who push up to, but not past, clearly defined boundaries. However, clarity to how censorship frameworks are applied would promote dialogue between regulators and artists, helping both parties develop a compromise that accommodates both their interests. This intricate balance between flexibility and transparency is what the reforms below seek to achieve.

4.2 Sandboxes

Similarly to Singapore's fintech[48] and healthcare sandboxes[49], a creative sandbox would designate specific zones where artists can explore more sensitive themes without needing a license or being subject to fully-fledged content scrutiny. A sandbox might be administered by the NAC in consultation with practicing artists, curators, and art academics, ensuring its operations reflects artistic considerations rather than anticipated regulatory concerns. For non-physical media like film, a similar measure might be adopted through audience suitability ratings, which the IMDA has already implemented in its Arts Entertainment Classification Code[50].

Sandboxes allow artists to explore works that reflect previously censored but contemporary issues like drug abuse in *Homepar* while enabling regulatory intervention against demonstrated threats to the public interest. By helping art develop organically, sandboxes also complement the state-building justification by presenting Singapore as a carefully managed cultural hub with ambitions for artistic development.

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[47] Louis Kaplow, 'Rules Versus Standards: An Economic Analysis' (1992) *42 Duke Law Journal 557-629*

[48] Monetary Authority of Singapore, 'Overview of Regulatory Sandbox' (MAS, 29 April 2024) https://www.mas.gov.sg/development/fintech/regulatory-sandbox accessed 12 November 2025.

[49] Synapxe Pte Ltd, 'About HX-IS (HealthX Innovation Sandbox)' (HealthX, 29 October 2025) https://innovation.healthx.sg accessed 12 November 2025.

[50] Info-Communications Media Development Authority, *Arts Entertainment Classification Code* (with effect from 2 June 2014)

4.3 Structured Assessment Frameworks

As in the URA's approach towards cigarettes in *Samsui Woman*, the current censorship regime often responds to the risk of public offence, rather than the public being demonstrably affected. This undermines the adherence to community norms that underpins the paternalistic justification.

A structured assessment framework might resolve this. This would evaluate artistic works on clear criteria such as artistic intent, public interest value, potential for genuine social harm and opportunities for constructive dialogue. Decisions under the framework should be accompanied by written reasons published within a defined timeframe to clarify the basis for regulatory intervention. Artists could also be afforded a right of appeal to an independent review tribunal, mirroring existing processes adopted by bodies like the Film Appeals Committee, that allow applicants to appeal against the IMDA's film classification decision[51].

By requiring authorities to articulate reasons for opposing a particular piece, this approach targets the paternalism justification. Over time, such assessments set various precedents that guide both artists and regulators, ensuring decisions are rooted in social realities rather than *ex ante* anxieties.

4.4 Regional Cooperation

Lorenzo Rudolf asserts that Singapore's art scene is stagnating in comparison to its regional counterparts like Indonesia, Thailand and Hong Kong[52]. Indeed, in 2018-2019, Hong Kong attracted 46% of Asia's contemporary art market, while the Art Stage fair in Singapore that was vital in putting it on the art map was cancelled[53]. Fostering ASEAN-wide programmes can help Singapore highlight its cultural vibrancy and elevate itself to the level of its regional peers. Substantively, the NAC could collaborate with its ASEAN counterparts to establish rotating artist residencies across member states, or co-curating regional exhibitions that celebrate Southeast Asian perspectives. Singapore already

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51 Infocomm Media Development Authority, Consultation with Committees (IMDA) https://www.imda.gov.sg/regulations-and-licensing-listing/content-standards-and-classification/consultation-with-committees accessed 15 January 2026.

52 Cristyn Lloyd, 'Is Singapore losing its standing as Southeast Asia's art hub?' (Southeast Asia Globe, 24 April 2018) https://www.cristynlloyd.com/posts/is-singapore-losing-its-standing-as-southeast-asias-art-hub accessed 13 November 2025.

53 Jeremie Molho, 'Becoming Asia's Art Market Hub: Comparing Singapore and Hong Kong' (2021) *Volume 10 Issue 2, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute*

collaborates with its regional counterparts, particularly in film and TV. In 2019, media networks Mediacorp (Singapore) and ViuTV (Hong Kong) joined hands to co-produce two new productions[54], while Singaporean drama Emerald Hill was acquired by Taiwan's Chinese Television System in 2025, the first foreign show aired since 2021[55].

Such cooperation signals Singapore's willingness to engage with creative themes beyond its domestic norms. By collaborating with countries whose artistic standards may be less restrictive, Singapore would gradually reframe its international image from one of tight control to one of creative openness, advancing state building through cultural diplomacy.

4.5 Advisory Opinions

Lastly, a significant hindrance to artistic development is not censorship itself, but rather the restrictive environment censorship creates. This is known as "self-censorship": where regulatory policies and restrictions shape articulatory practices (**Fong**)[56]. Artists are discouraged from more adventurous work, internalising unwritten rules and "OB markers". This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where artists self-censor because they fear rejection, resulting in a culture governed not only by official regulation but by pervasive anticipation of it.

An "advisory opinion" mechanism might mitigate this. Unlike the regular approval process that requires a finished work and results in a binding decision, an advisory opinion model provide artists with non-binding guidance at the conceptual stage. Artists would submit a brief project synopsis, draft materials and an identification of potentially sensitive elements. The regulator would then issue a non-binding response which identifies specific concerns and suggests amendments. This would allow the artist to proceed with confidence and builds a repository of precedent that guides both artists and officials.

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[54] Mediacorp, 'Singapore-Hong Kong co-productions take centrestage as Mediacorp and ViuTV seal two-title drama deal' (Mediacorp, 4 December 2019) https://www.mediacorp.sg/business/advertising/trade-news/singapore-hong-kong-co-productions-take-centrestage-as-mediacorp-12454014 accessed 15 January 2026.

[55] Nico Franks, 'Singapore drama Emerald Hill becomes first foreign show acquired by Taiwan's CTS since 2021' (C21Media, 7 August 2025) https://www.c21media.net/news/singapore-drama-emerald-hill-becomes-first-foreign-show-acquired-by-taiwans-cts-since-2021/ accessed 20 January 2026.

[56] Siao Yuong Fong, 'Rethinking Censorship: A Case Study of Singaporean Media' (2018) 25(4) *Javnost – The Public* 410

Advisory opinions target all three justifications to censorship. Foremostly, they preserve the state's capacity to intervene when genuine and significant risks to cultural harmony arise. Furthermore, they provide insight to the state's process, making the censorship regime more dialogical and less paternalistic. Lastly, they reiterate Singapore's willingness to allow more adventurous artistic development prudently.

While artists could simply ignore the advice given, the substantive advice can help them adjust their work to enable its successful publication in Singapore, consistent with both State and personal interests. Further, advisory opinions can help *alleviate* administrative burdens rather than *create* them, because they help establish a clear path an artist can take to ensure their work complies with censorship requirements. This transparent approach helps artists understand expectations and proceed without wasting resources on art that might eventually be censored.

5. Conclusion

Singapore's current censorship framework is historically understandable. As a growing nation that needed to depress cultural tensions and maintain its pristine image, it is no wonder that it adopted significant artistic censorship laws. Yet, with Singapore maturing socially, economically and culturally since then, these justifications no longer map completely onto the contemporary realities of Singaporean society and artistic culture. The proposed reforms seek to preserve the legitimacy of the underlying aims without constraining artistic freedom excessively. They move towards a more dialogical and transparent regime that enhances creativity without formal or self-censorship, striking a balance between Singapore's sensitivities and facilitating the organic growth of artistic capital. This would pave a better way forward for Singapore to cement its place in the international artistic stage.

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Pardon me, sir, I did not do it on purpose: The case for reform of the mandatory death penalty for drug crimes in Singapore

Isaac Chan

1 Introduction

At noon on the 16th of October 1793 in the modern-day Place de la Concorde in Paris, France, Marie Antoinette was executed by guillotine. This was by no means the first documented execution in history, but it was perhaps one of the most high-profile, not least for her unremarkable, yet haunting, final words "*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur. Je ne l'ai pas fait exprès*"[57] after she accidentally stepped on her executioner's shoe.

More than 225 years on, France has neither a monarchy nor a death penalty, with the abolishment of the latter in 1981[58]. Yet this is far from a universal reality — more than 45 countries around the world still use capital punishment as a sanction[59] with 1518 executions worldwide in 2024[60].

[57] "Pardon me, sir, I did not do it on purpose".
[58] Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (2025) *Abolition of the death penalty*. Available at: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/human-rights/abolition-of-the-death-penalty/ (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[59] Amnesty International (2025) *Global: Recorded executions hit their highest figure since 2015*. Amnesty International, 8 April. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/global-recorded-executions-hit-their-highest-figure-since-2015/ (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[60] Ibid.

Singapore is one of those countries. Despite fierce contentions both within[61] and without[62], it has carried on attaching and enforcing the death penalty for murder[63], carrying arms[64], and drug crimes[65]. Of this 'trifecta', the death penalty for drug crimes attracts arguably the strongest opposition, with significant discontent surrounding Singapore's high-profile executions of Nagaenthran Dharmalingan and, more recently, Datchinamurthy Kataiah.

Yet does this opposition hold any water? That forms part of the key question canvassed in this article. I argue that the use of the death penalty for drug crimes is immoral and violates human rights. Further, the government's case for retaining the death penalty for drug crimes, which relies heavily on the premise that the death penalty is a powerful deterrent, lacks verity — empirical criminology consistently finds no evidence that capital punishment deters drug offences[66]. Nonetheless, I consider that, given the overwhelming (silent) majority of Singaporeans who support the use of the death penalty,[67] social attitudes mean that full abolishment is perhaps not the right step in terms of the potential effects. This article concludes by proposing a way forward which I argue appropriately balances the severity of the punishment with the need for more humane and normatively acceptable methods.

2 The use of the death penalty in Singapore

Before diving deeper into normative arguments, it is perhaps apt to summarise exactly how the legislation operates in Singapore. The Misuse of Drugs Act 1973 ("**MDA**") criminalises the trafficking of certain controlled drugs, such as cocaine[68] and methamphetamine[69], with the mandatory death penalty being triggered above certain mass thresholds. Recent amendments via Section 33B of the MDA grant judicial discretion to impose a life sentence (coupled with no less than 15 strokes of

[61] e.g. Singapore Anti Death Penalty Campaign (SADPC), Transformative Justice Collective, etc.
[62] e.g. Amnesty International, Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN), International Bar Association — Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and Human Rights Watch (HRW)
[63] Section 302, Penal Code 1871.
[64] Section 4, Arms Offences Act 1973.
[65] Section 33, Misuse of Drugs Act 1973 ("MDA").
[66] See Death Penalty Project (2022), 'Deterrence and the Death Penalty', which examined 700 studies into the deterrent effects on criminality, including 52 studies focused on the death penalty. See further section 3.2 below.
[67] See section 5.1 below.
[68] Second Schedule, MDA.
[69] Ibid.

the cane) if (a) the convicted person was merely a courier and (b) the Public Prosecutor certifies that the courier provided 'substantive assistance' to enforcement agencies in disrupting drug trafficking[70].

Yet any optimism that this signifies a softening of the country's stance towards drug crimes is premature. The Public Prosecutor has the 'sole discretion' to grant the certificate and this grant is not subject to judicial review[71]. This means that while there is a *prospect* of a more lenient punishment, the executive's decision is decisive, transferring a significant portion of the sentencing function away from the judiciary. In fact, the publicly available cases among the 82 certificates granted to eligible couriers between 2013 and 2022 *all* show that judicial discretion had been exercised in favour of the convicted[72]. As for executions, in 2025 alone, 9 of the 11 executions were for convicts of non-violent drug offences[73].

3 The aims and justifications

3.1 The legislative purpose

The motivation behind Singapore's tough stance on drugs is perhaps best embodied in Lee Kuan Yew's interview with BBC HardTalk, where he famously said, "They assume that if you are kind to drug peddlers, you build a better society. If you enter Singapore with kilos of drugs, it will destroy thousands of families… Against thousands of such deaths, one death [of a drug trafficker] is too kind."[74] More recently, Minister Shanmugam pointed to an apparent link between drug use and increased gang violence, homicide rates, and addiction, as well as the vulnerability of Singapore within the 'Golden Triangle'[75]. It is also commendable that despite the tough stance against traffickers, the

[70] Section 33B, MDA.
[71] Section 33B(4), MDA.
[72] Ministry of Home Affairs (2022) *Written reply to parliamentary question on the issuance of certificates of substantial assistance under the Misuse of Drugs Act since 1 January 2013*. Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs. Available at: https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/mha-publications/public-consultations/2022-written-reply-to-parl-question-certificates-of-substantial-assistance.pdf (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[73] Amnesty International (2025b) *Singapore: Unlawful execution of Malaysian for drug offence must be halted*. Amnesty International, 22 January. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/singapore-unlawful-execution-of-malaysian-for-drug-offence-must-be-halted/ (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[74] Singaporean Voices (2017) *Lee Kuan Yew's interview with Tim Sebastian on BBC HARDtalk*. 4 March. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELSfVwAnQaQ (Accessed: [date]).
[75] Ministry of Home Affairs (2024) *Ministerial statement on Singapore's National Drug Control Policy*. Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs. Available at: https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/ministerial-statement-on-singapores-national-drug-control-policy (Accessed: 13 February 2026).

government takes a different approach towards abusers, with a focus on rehabilitation especially for low-risk, first-time abusers[76].

Therefore, the clear goal of the MDA is to stem the drug problem at the source, cutting off supply. To be clear, I do not in any way disagree with the *purpose* of the MDA and in fact align myself with it. The key issue is, as explored below, whether the means are suitable for the ends.

3.2 The government's case for deterrence

Against this background, the government has chosen to implement the death penalty (and the narrow exception) for drug crimes under the MDA. It maintains that the mandatory death penalty effectively deters drug traffickers. According to the government, the low capital punishment thresholds[77] deter large shipments of drugs, targeting the business of drug traffickers. It points to the "higher awareness" among traffickers of the "severe legal consequences" attached, with 85.1% of offending non-traffickers agreeing that the death penalty has a deterrent effect[78]. Furthermore, the Ministry of Home Affairs ("**MHA**") point to the 66% reduction in the "average net weight of opium trafficked in the four-year window after the mandatory death penalty was introduced in 1990" for certain quantities of opium[79].

A number of issues arise from this.

Firstly, what should one make of the lack of precise and detailed statistics for the controlled drugs scheduled in the MDA? It is telling that the choice of statistic is "average net weight" rather than the total weight trafficked — for example, one could imagine that the total weight of heroin trafficked stayed unchanged or even increased but was trafficked in a greater number of smaller

[76] Central Narcotics Bureau (2022) *CNB explains*. Singapore: Central Narcotics Bureau. Available at: https://www.cnb.gov.sg/NewsAndEvents/News/CNBexplains (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[77] 30 grams of cocaine, as per Schedule 2 of the MDA.
[78] Ministry of Home Affairs (2021) *The death penalty in Singapore*. Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs. Available at: https://www.mha.gov.sg/publications/reports/the-death-penalty-in-singapore (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[79] Ibid.

shipments. Indeed, Michael Hor[80] and David Johnson[81] separately come to the conclusion that the most likely cause of a reduction in executions this century[82] was what Hor terms the "14.99 charge", which concerns the exercise of prosecutorial discretion for the trafficking of heroin below the prescribed mandatory death penalty threshold of 15 grams[83].

Against this background, the government's express acknowledgement of this flawed metric is surprising. As the Ministry of Home Affairs states: "The deterrent effect of the death penalty has been shown by [...] drug traffickers restricting their drug trafficking behaviours, e.g. by trafficking below the capital sentence thresholds."[84] The decreased "average net weight" cited would obviously follow if the truth (as the MHA represents) is that drug traffickers are being more diligent in their legal research and more deliberate with their trafficking strategies. Thus, we can hardly ascribe any value to this statistic.

This explicit acknowledgement of *active steps* taken by traffickers to contravene the law also suggests a wider problem regarding Singapore's drug policy. While there should be no doubt as to the CNB, MHA and various authorities' commitment to combating drug crimes in Singapore, the satisfaction with the thresholds while *knowing* that they are being intentionally contravened by traffickers means that further steps should be examined and taken to align the laws with the government's policy.

Secondly, the relevance of "average net weight" as the key statistic is actually diminished in light of Minister K. Shanmugam's statement in 2024, published on the MHA website. He states, "The number of drug abusers arrested increased by 10% from the previous year, while the cannabis abusers reached a 10-year high"[85]. This clearly shows that, despite the continued use of the death penalty, there is a steady trend upwards in drug use (assuming the increase did not result from more frequent raids

[80] Hor, M. (2013) 'Singapore's death penalty: The beginning of the end?' in Hood, R. and Deva, S. (eds.) *Confronting capital punishment in Asia: Human rights, politics and public opinion*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 141–167.
[81] Johnson, D.T. (2012) 'The jolly hangman, the jailed journalist, and the decline of Singapore's death penalty', *Asian Journal of Criminology*, 7(1), pp. 41–59.
[82] Hoyle, C. and Hutton, J. (2024) 'National sovereignty versus universal human rights: Drugs and the mandatory death penalty in Singapore', *Amicus Journal*, January.
[83] Section 5 and Second Schedule, Part 4 of the MDA1973.
[84] Ministry of Home Affairs, n. 22.
[85] See fn 19 *supra*.

and other enforcement measures). The almost inevitable inference is that supply has increased in that period too — only 10% of Singaporeans who consumed drugs did so overseas[86]. This means that, even if we were to accept the evidence from the 1990s as incontrovertible evidence of a deterrent effect of the death penalty, that effect has been gradually eroded and, at the surface level, the contrast with the 90s is no longer strong evidence of a persisting deterrent effect to this day.

Lastly, relying on what appears to be an unreliable measure of the level of drug offending to draw a tenuous link between the mandatory death penalty and drug crime rates sits uncomfortably with the government's continued, implied insistence that research disproving said link[87] fails to consider Singapore's context. From the statement that the deterrent effect of the death penalty is demonstrated by "the majority of Singapore residents and non-residents agreeing that the death penalty is more effective than life imprisonment in deterring very serious crimes"[88], it can reasonably be inferred that the government's position is that the death penalty has a deterrent effect unique to Singapore because a majority of Singaporeans believe in it, despite the link already being disproved in the rest of the world. Taken together, this means that the basis for the government's argument on effectiveness is completely unfounded. At the abstract level, such a belief is easily influenced precisely by the repeated insistence of such surveys that the death penalty is effective, rendering this argument circular if this is indeed the case. More importantly, since the rationale for using statistics from the 1990s is to juxtapose trafficking statistics before and after the implementation of the death penalty, the surveying of opinions on "Respondent's Perceptions on the Deterrent Effect of the Mandatory Death Penalty versus the Discretionary Death Penalty and the Death Penalty versus Life Imprisonment"[89] surely must be equally selective[90]. Otherwise, how is one to form a *reasoned* and *educated* opinion on the issue?

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[86] Central Narcotics Bureau (2023) *Drug-related findings from IMH study*. Singapore: Central Narcotics Bureau. Available at: https://www.cnb.gov.sg/NewsAndEvents/News/Drug-related-findings-from-IMH-study (Accessed: 13 February 2026).

[87] See section 4.1 below.

[88] Ministry of Home Affairs, n. 22.

[89] MHA Research and Statistics Division (2021) *Survey on Singapore residents' attitudes towards the death penalty*. Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs. Available at: https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/oppp/2021-survey-on-singapore-residents-attitudes-towards-the-death-penalty.pdf (Accessed: 13 February 2026).

[90] Ibid. Respondents included Singaporean residents aged 15 and above.

In summary, there seems to be no credible evidence of a deterrent effect on both drug traffickers and ordinary Singaporeans.

4 Further Problems with the Justification

4.1 Research disproving the link between the death penalty and deterrence

Apart from the criticisms levelled above, there is research demonstrating a lack of a unique deterrent effect of the death penalty, compared to other punishments such as life or long-term imprisonment[91].

Contrary to the 'simplistic correlation' drawn between crime rates and capital punishment[92], a strong body of research has noted that the link between the death penalty and deterrence does not exist[93]. Furthermore, the judiciary has explicitly recognised the failure of deterrence to justify the use of the death penalty — in *PP v Wan Wenfeng*[94], the judge rightly noted that the necessity and appropriateness of the death penalty is a separate question from the need for a 'deterrent sentence', and placed the burden on the prosecution to satisfy this test of necessity and appropriateness. Unfortunately, it appears that these arguments were not taken further in the judicial sphere and, *Wan Wenfeng* being a murder case, these issues have not been ventilated in the context of non-violent drug crimes where the onus to demonstrate proportionality and necessity is arguably higher.

This is not a purely theoretical argument. There is credible statistical evidence of the worsening rates of drug crimes in Singapore, with drug arrests up 10% in 2023 and nearly 30% of those arrested

[91] See, e.g. Zimring, F.E., Fagan, J. and Johnson, D.T. (2010) 'Executions, deterrence, and homicide: A tale of two cities', *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, 7(1), pp. 1–29.

[92] Chan, W.-C. (2016) 'The death penalty in Singapore: In decline but still too soon for optimism', *Asian Journal of Criminology*, 11(3), pp. 179–206.

[93] See e.g. Cohen-Cole, E. *et al.* (2008) 'Model uncertainty and the deterrent effect of capital punishment', *American Law and Economics Review*, 11(2), pp. 335–369; Beck, E., Adcock, C.F. and Bantimba, A. (2020) 'A Public Health Case for the Abolition of the Death Penalty', in *Social Work, Criminal Justice and the Death Penalty*. Oxford University Press, pp. 117–130; Donohue, J. and Wolfers, J. (2006) 'Uses and abuses of empirical evidence in the death penalty debate', *Stanford Law Review*, 58(3), pp. 791–845.

[94] [2014] SGHC 23.

being under the age of 30[95]. Hence, it is questionable whether the scepticism that research in a different country can ever be conclusive of the situation in Singapore in *PP v Yong Vui Kong*[96], holds water.

4.2 Violation of international law and human rights

Furthermore, it has been put forth by various international organisations that the MDA puts Singapore in breach of international law[97]. A close examination of the arguments and their validity is beyond the scope of this paper, but I argue that such a violation or such external dissent should not influence Singapore's policy on drugs. Any effective drug policy must be tailored to the needs and demographics of a specific country and the blanket application of a Western-centric set of human rights is in my opinion insufficient to capture the relevant nuances involved in the context of Singapore.

However, the human rights case is more convincing. Beyond the cruelty of the sentence itself, the requirement that a certificate of assistance must be granted is a 'legislative prescription for the exercise of judicial power to be conditional upon the exercise of executive power'[98]. As Amnesty International points out, this provision therefore violates the right to a fair trial as it places 'life and death decisions in the hands of an official who is neither a judge nor a neutral party'[99]. It cannot seriously be contended that it is appropriate and fair to do so.

Furthermore, the wording and operation of the legislation itself seems to preclude any significant application of the provision. Firstly, at the surface level, it must be questioned how a 'courier' who is, in reality, at the lowest level of the drug hierarchy is able to give any 'substantial assistance'[100]. Secondly, 'substantial assistance' has been left deliberately undefined by the courts as

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[95] Channel News Asia (2024) 'Drug abuse arrests up 10% in 2023; nearly 30% of those caught aged under 30: CNB', *Channel News Asia*, 7 February. Available at: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/drug-abuse-arrests-up-10-2023-nearly-30-those-caught-aged-under-30-cnb-4123456 (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[96] [2010] SGCA 20.
[97] See e.g. fn 3 *supra*.
[98] *Prabagaran a/l Srivijayan v Public Prosecutor and other matters* [2016] SGCA 67.
[99] Amnesty International (2021) *Singapore: Cooperate or die: Singapore's flawed reforms to the mandatory death penalty*. London: Amnesty International. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa36/3620/2021/en/ (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[100] Ibid.

they have recused themselves from doing so[101], leaving the provision vague and uncertain. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, such assistance can presumably only be rendered where the CNB and other agencies have themselves been unable to make any real progress. The competency of these organisations would be highly suspect if the information from a singular courier (in an organisation or syndicate of hundreds or even thousands of people) could 'substantially' assist them where their vast governmental resources have failed to do so. On the contrary, the CNB's main issues stem from just how well-organised these drug syndicates are, meaning there is often a great separation between the lowest in the hierarchy (i.e. the couriers) and the rest of the organisation. As the Global Investigative Journalism Network found, couriers are the most visible and most frequently labelled by the media as "drug traffickers", which deflects attention away from much more powerful syndicates who 'effectively operate above the law'[102]. Therefore, it seems, from this viewpoint, that there was no intention on the part of the legislature to really allow couriers to benefit from the exception.

5 Reform

5.1 Abolishment?

A suitable drug policy for Singapore must, therefore, balance considerations of human rights and proportionality of punishment with the need to keep drug abuse and trafficking rates low. In this regard, despite the many objections above, abolition may not be the best choice for Singapore. However, there is no real reason to confine the scope of this discussion to a dichotomy between, for example, imprisonment paired with an "add-on" of corporeal punishment (like caning) versus the death penalty. All the circumstances of the country are to be considered, though we can rely on research based in other jurisdictions to guide our approach.

One example is Portugal, which has pursued a system of complete decriminalisation of the public and private use, acquisition and possession of drugs since 2000[103]. This marks a shift towards

[101] *Muhammad Ridzuan bin Muhammad Ali v Public Prosecutor and other matters* [2015] SGCA 53.
[102] Lintner, B. (2022) *Guide to Investigating Organized Crime in the Golden Triangle: Chapter 1 — Drug Trafficking*. Global Investigative Journalism Network, 28 November. Available at: https://gijn.org/resource/guide-to-investigating-organized-crime-in-the-golden-triangle-chapter-1-drug-trafficking/ (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
[103] Rêgo, X., Costa, M.J., Carvalho, H., Tavares, A., & Duarte, P. (2021) '20 years of Portuguese drug policy – developments, challenges and the quest for human rights', *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 16(1). Available at: https://substanceabusepolicy.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13011-020-00339-5 (Accessed: 13 February 2026).

treating rather than criminalising drug users[104], which has seen its drug rates remain well below the European average at just 12.8% of the population[105]. While it still criminalises the trafficking of drugs, it does not (and has never) use the death penalty like Singapore. Despite treating its drug problem as a public health issue rather than a criminal matter and allowing basically free use of drugs, the country is nonetheless able to keep its drug usage rates relatively low.

Another example is the United Kingdom. The UK has never used capital offences as a method to combat drug crimes. In fact, the rise in police-recorded drug offences over the years has been statistically insignificant — 8.8% of people aged 16 to 59 used an illicit drug in the year ending March 2024, showing a 1% change from the previous year[106]. Recall, in contrast, the 10% increase in drug abusers arrested in Singapore, discussed *supra* at Section 3.2.

While it is accepted that Singapore is located in a different geographical and cultural context, is it really the case that we cannot take any confidence at all from the effectiveness of non-capital punishment on the rate of drug crimes? The MHA may argue that our precarious position in the so-called 'Golden Triangle'[107] means that Singapore is exceptionally vulnerable to the inpouring of drugs which will inevitably occur when we lift our heavy penalties. The problem is that it is not at all obvious how this increase would come about. As CNB found, 82.1% of Singaporeans perceived the consumption of illicit drugs to be "very harmful … [r]egardless of drug type and frequency of drug consumption"[108]. This suggests that an overwhelming majority of Singaporeans are very unlikely to consume drugs simply due to an ease of supply — a nod to the successful educational measures taken by the government targeted at increasing awareness of the harmful effects of drugs. Moreover, even if we accept the deterrence arguments, it is doubtful that accessibility and supply are key factors influencing consumption. In the same survey, only 9.5% of survey respondents who had consumed

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[104] Ibid.

[105] Balch, O. (2024), *'It beats getting stoned in the street': how Portugal decriminalised drugs — as seen from the 'shoot-up' centre*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/25/it-beats-getting-stoned-on-the-street-how-portugal-decriminalised-drugs-as-seen-from-the-shoot-up-centre (Accessed: [date]).

[106] UK Government (2025) *Seizures of drugs in England and Wales, financial year ending 2024*. London: Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/seizures-of-drugs-in-england-and-wales-financial-year-ending-2024 (Accessed: 13 February 2026).

[107] Ministry of Home Affairs, n.16.

[108] CNB (2023), fn 30 *supra*.

drugs did so while overseas[109], where, following the natural course of logic, drugs are more readily accessible due to more lenient rules on their supply and use. In any case, as demonstrated above, it is not clear what exactly the deterrent effect inherent in the death penalty is.

Nonetheless, I accept that there is an inherent risk in a radical shift in position towards complete abolishment of the death penalty. According to Chan et al (2018), 86.9% of Singaporeans surveyed support the use of the death penalty for drug trafficking[110]. Even with a rigorous educational programme dispelling common misconceptions on the effectiveness of the death penalty as a deterrent, given the political sensitivity of the issue, it is unlikely that such a radical shift overnight would be adopted. Furthermore, despite the lack of a unique deterrent effect of the death penalty for drug crimes in other jurisdictions, it would be reckless to proceed with abolishment without at least testing and observing its effects in the Singapore context — the government would need country-specific statistics to justify such a move politically. What, then, would be the way forward?

5.2 Proposed reform: A gradual shift away from capital punishment

I argue that a gradual shift away from capital punishment is perhaps most apt. It is proposed that this shift takes place in three main stages — first, a move towards greater use of the discretionary death penalty; secondly, the partial abolishment of the death penalty; and lastly, the complete abolishment of the death penalty.

5.2.1 Stage 1: Using the discretionary death penalty

Much of the above discussion has centred on the (lack of a) unique deterrent effect of the mandatory death penalty. It is perhaps also questionable if the discretionary death penalty has any deterrent effect distinct from that of a life sentence, but it represents an appropriate shift in drug legislation for two reasons — firstly, it prevents the execution of vulnerable couriers; and secondly, it avoids the aforementioned risk inherent in a radical change of position.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Chan, W.C., Leong, C.W. and Tan, J.B. (2018) *Public opinion on the death penalty in Singapore: Survey findings*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies. Available at: https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-public-opinion-on-the-death-penalty-in-singapore-(final).pdf (Accessed: 13 February 2026).

A discretionary death penalty, firstly, allows for the courts to consider all the circumstances of a case, including the accused's intelligence, past records, and any undue pressures exerted on him which induced him to commit the relevant offence. Together with this change, the requirement for 'substantive assistance' must be revisited at least in the context of such vulnerable persons. It is acknowledged that the 'diminished responsibility' exception already exists[111] but its current operation clearly leaves much to be desired, as shown in the case of couriers like Nagaenthran Dharmalingan where his low IQ did not engage the exception, though arguably this is precisely the kind of case which should be covered under the narrow exception in the MDA. This then also allows the MDA to retain the allegedly superior deterrent effect of capital punishment which the government wants to preserve.

Secondly, taking into account the risk of radically altering the law and thereby shifting public perception, such a narrow but significant step down from the mandatory death penalty where the most serious offenders are still punished avoids this risk altogether. The continuation in force of the death penalty nonetheless signals the government's harsh stance against drugs and continues to set it apart from the majority of nations around the world.

One possible shortfall of this proposal is the political unpalatability level of discretion afforded to the courts. As seen in the section 33B amendment, Parliament appears anxious to retain a degree of executive control over convictions and sentencing in the realm of drug crimes, and to implement the discretionary death penalty would mark a step back in this regard. Accounting for this concern, it might be more appropriate to retain the mandatory death penalty for a select group of people to be defined by Parliament — e.g., the key members of a major drug syndicate, or a courier of a far larger amount of drugs than the present threshold. This way, Parliament may achieve its public policy aim of dealing with traffickers and other cogs in the drug machine harshly, while leaving the judiciary to deal, at their own discretion, with more minor cases of drug trafficking.

A possible concern the government might have in relation to this proposal is potential judicial reticence in dishing out the death penalty. This is clear from the way the judiciary has exercised its new discretion under section 33B. However, this is not by itself a reason to not adopt the discretionary death penalty — the government's wish to retain control in this sphere may be adequately satisfied by

[111] Section 33B(3), MDA.

retaining a substantial degree of influence in such decisions through a set of comprehensive guidelines illuminating the path for members of the judiciary.

5.2.2 Stage 2: Partial Abolishment

This intermediary stage primarily aims to allow close examination of the deterrent effects of the *discretionary* death penalty. By lifting the new discretionary death penalty for certain drugs or increasing the threshold required to engage the death penalty significantly, we can potentially recreate the so-called "90s' contrast" discussed above in modern conditions — that is, observing, to a certain extent, the contrasting effects of the mandatory death penalty before and after it is partially lifted in Stage 2.

The primary reason for designating this as Stage 2 instead of starting out with partial abolishment immediately is the need to evaluate the effects of Stage 1 on offenders' and potential offenders' mindsets, before such partial abolishment can be attempted. If, at Stage 1, there is already a significantly greater number of drug crimes due to drug traffickers being more motivated to roll the dice with the judiciary, then Stage 2 should never be implemented. The deterrent effect of the mandatory death penalty would be clear. Overall, the risk of a dangerous surge in drug crimes is greatly mitigated in this tiered approach.

Even where Stage 1 is successful, however, caution must be taken in evaluating the statistics gathered in Stage 2. How exactly it is to be carried out would be subject to executive discretion, but it is foreseeable that the death penalty may be removed or subject to different thresholds at different rates for different drugs. If there is variance across the board in this regard, one must consider the different consumption habits, rates of supply, perceived risks and other factors in evaluating how much of the rise (if any) of drug crime rates is attributable to the removal or the raising of the threshold for the death penalty itself.

5.2.3 Stage 3: Complete Abolition

A successful Stage 2 — where there is no statistically significant increase in drug crimes for a designated period of time — would demonstrate that there is clearly no unique deterrent effect to both the mandatory and the discretionary death penalty. Here, it is safe to conclude that we could

retain the safety and security as desired by the Singaporean stance on drugs while adopting a more humane and appropriate approach — complete abolishment of the death penalty.

As far as this author is aware, there is no research on the point of how long this designated period of time should be. In any case, this should rightly be a matter of executive discretion, with the government legislating for the abolishment whenever it deems fit.

6 Conclusion

In summary, the government's arguments of deterrence and fairness in its use of capital punishment for drug crimes can no longer be accepted uncritically. The objections are also not merely theoretical — it is obvious, from cases like that of Nagaenthran Dharmalingan and more recently Datchinamurthy a/l Kataiah, that those bearing the brunt of the city-state's wrath towards drug traffickers are often vulnerable persons who carry rather (in the grand scheme of things) insignificant quantities of drugs under mitigating circumstances which the legislature explicitly prohibits from being considered.

Given how seriously the crime of murder is (and should be) taken in Singapore, it is perhaps shocking and to an extent hypocritical that the state's discretion to kill is not subject to any form of strict threshold or scrutiny. It is ironic that, two hundred years on from the French citizens executing their Queen for perceived crimes against the people, and putting in place a Republic where power is given to the people, some states like Singapore vest the power to kill citizens in a select few people in power. While these state governments have the democratic mandate, it is time we questioned if it is ever acceptable to extend this democratic mandate to killing citizens where there is a lack of evidentiary, moral and rights-based justifications. Nonetheless, the political realities and social perceptions of Singaporeans mean that it would be difficult to justify a wholesale abolishment of the death penalty in the immediate future. In this regard, the three-step proposal best aligns Singapore with its public image of an advanced, modern civilisation.

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The Rise of Divorce in Singapore

Abigail Liew

Context

The family unit is one of the most central social institutions, shaping individual wellbeing and contributing to the stability of society. Therefore, policies that shape the family unit are of great interest to the state.[112] While family policy spans a wide range of issues, this article focuses on the issue of divorce, which has rapidly become an emergent matter in Singapore. As Paulin Straughan captures, 'it is important academically to study divorce in the context of Singapore, a small city state which is currently going through amazing transformations'.[113] Indeed, the rise of divorce in Singapore is a particularly significant social phenomenon, situated within the rapid societal, technological and financial developments that have advanced the nation since 1965. Divorce in Singapore illustrates how macrolevel structural changes, such as economic growth, expanding female independence and broader social shifts, can be subsumed into the private sphere, destabilising traditional marriage models and long-standing familial arrangements.

In *Marriage dissolution in Singapore revisiting family values and ideology in marriage*, 2009, Straughan expresses how divorce, delayed marriages and low fertility rates have all become increasingly prominent in contemporary societies, a trend that has evolved as societies have shifted from functioning as agrarian communities to cosmopolitan cities. With the emergence of industrialisation, the availability of new social outlets has decreased the necessity of relying on the family for social stability. This has enabled the family unit to be less influential as a 'social policing agent', in turn, giving individuals more autonomy regarding marital decisions.[114] As marriages have shifted from being based on duty and economic survival to emerging out of self-fulfilment and emotional satisfaction, divorce has similarly become more socially acceptable.

In parallel with these developments in marriage, divorce has risen slowly but consistently across Singapore across the last few decades.[115] Today, divorce in Singapore involves a two-stage legal process. The court first decides whether the marriage should be dissolved, before proceeding to resolve ancillary matters such as the children's custody arrangements, matrimonial property and the individuals' property. Crucially, the marriage must have broken down irretrievably due to at least one of the following reasons -- adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion, or separation for extended periods, or if the couple produces an agreement in writing that the marriage

[112] Chung, W.-Y. (2021) 'Family policies and care regimes in Asia', International Journal of Social Welfare, 30(4), p. 371.
[113] Straughan, P.T. (2009) Marriage dissolution in Singapore: Revisiting family values and ideology in marriage. Leiden: Brill, p. 1.
[114] Straughan, P.T. (2009) Marriage dissolution in Singapore: Revisiting family values and ideology in marriage. Leiden: Brill, p. 3.
[115] Straughan, P.T. (2009) Marriage dissolution in Singapore: Revisiting family values and ideology in marriage. Leiden: Brill, p. 7.

has irretrievably broken down.[116] These requirements reveal recurring patterns of marital stress that could be improved upon through policy. In particular, many of the behaviours captured under "unreasonable behaviour" – such as chronic conflict, emotional withdrawal, unequal domestic responsibilities, and caregiving overload, reflect deeper structural inequalities within marriage. The growth in divorce rates suggests the prevalence of recurring marital issues that emerge long before dissolution, highlighting the need for pre-divorce policies that target dissatisfaction in family life.

As I explore below, while Singapore has built a sophisticated and therapeutic divorce system, the focus remains overwhelmingly on managing marital breakdown rather than preventing it. By examining structural issues in marriage and the Family Justice System, I argue that stronger pre-divorce support and more gender-balanced policies can better support individuals through marital contexts.

The Family Justice System

In Singapore, issues of divorce are negotiated through the Family Justice System, established under the Family Justice Act 2014.[117] The main objectives of the system are to provide procedural rules and legal support regarding the divorce process that enables spouses to achieve justice without acrimony or compromising any children's wellbeing.[118] To support these aims, divorce proceedings in court are encouraged to be conducted in a 'just, expeditious and economical' manner, often through alternative forms of litigation, such as mediation, negotiation and collaborative practices before a court case is pursued.[119] Social support, such as counselling and therapy, is also available before, during and after a divorce proceeding. This procedural style reflects the court's broader therapeutic approach.

A distinctive feature of the system is its emphasis on amicability and cooperation. Spouses are encouraged to view their marriage as an 'equal co-operative partnership… for their mutual benefit' rather than as a conflict.[120] The system is especially interested in protecting the wellbeing of children (defined as individuals under the age of 21). When children are involved, the court may appoint a Child Representative to ensure that the child's views are represented throughout the legal proceedings.[121]

As Leong explores, mediation is at the heart of Singapore's family courts.[122] Guided by a therapeutic and multidisciplinary approach to justice, the negotiation of family issues aims to reduce the acrimony

[116] Women's Charter 1961 (Singapore Statutes Online). (1961). Available at: https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/WC1961

[117] Leong, W.K. (2018) 'From substantive law towards family justice for the child in divorce proceedings in Singapore', Singapore Academy of Law Journal, 2018-01, Vol.30 (Special issue), p. 587.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Family Justice Courts. (2026) Family Justice Courts Practice Directions 2024. Family Justice Courts, Singapore Judiciary. Available at: https://epd2024-familyjusticecourts.judiciary.gov.sg/

[120] Leong, W.K. (2018) 'From substantive law towards family justice for the child in divorce proceedings in Singapore', Singapore Academy of Law Journal, 2018-01, Vol.30 (Special issue), p. 592.

[121] Leong, W.K. (2018) 'From substantive law towards family justice for the child in divorce proceedings in Singapore', *Singapore Academy of Law Journal*, 2018-01, Vol.30 (Special issue), p. 594.

[122] Leong, W.K. (2018) 'From substantive law towards family justice for the child in divorce proceedings in Singapore', Singapore Academy of Law Journal, 2018-01, Vol.30 (Special issue), p. 592.

and negative impacts of divorce on children.[123] Since 1995, Singapore has expanded its specialist support within the family courts, introducing a dedicated mediation unit in 2006 and the Child Focused Resolution Centre in 2011 to enhance amicability and child welfare.[124] Mediated divorce processes involve more consensual dispute resolution, often supported through the use of interdisciplinary interventions, such as parental coordination, co-parenting counselling, and a collaborative divorce model.[125]

Research consistently highlights that mediated outcomes tend to be more stable, involve fewer returns to court, and lead to higher long-term satisfaction. In *To negotiate, mediate or litigate?*, 2022, Dorcas Anderson contends that mediation is more durable as compared to litigated and negotiated cases, measured through rates of compliance and re-litigation following divorce.[126] Durability, the ability of a divorce settlement to last, is a particularly important metric as post-divorce arrangements shape co-parenting relationships, financial obligations, and the children's wellbeing. Long-lasting agreements have been evidenced to reduce long-term conflict, minimise the need for repeated court intervention, and provide a more stable environment for children, all of which reflect the central aims of the Family Justice System.[127] These metrics are reiterated in the biggest studies that have compared divorce outcomes across mediation and litigation, including Pearson and Thoennes' Denver Custody Mediation Project; Kelly's Divorce and Mediation Research Project; and Emery, Matthews, and Wyer's Charlottesville Mediation Project, which all consistently highlight that mediated outcomes are more favourable than litigated ones.[128]

Beyond Singapore, mediation in divorce settings has been proven to be effective across global contexts. For instance, countries such as Australia, the UK, and Canada have similarly integrated modes of counselling, child interviews, and multidisciplinary interventions into their family dispute resolution systems.[129] Altogether, the evidence consistently affirms mediation as the model most capable of resolving family disputes fairly, sustainably and with minimal harm in divorce contexts.

Pre-Divorce Gaps

Aligned with the Family Justice System's focus on mediation and child welfare, Singapore has implemented a range of policies and support programmes aimed at assisting families after divorce. The court offers several free counselling and psychological services for divorcing couples and children, including emotional guidance, psychological evaluations,

[123] Anderson, D.Q. (2022) 'To negotiate, mediate or litigate? Examining the durability of divorce outcomes in the Singapore family courts', Family Court Review, 2022-07, Vol.60 (3), p. 436.
[124] Leong, W.K. (2018) 'From substantive law towards family justice for the child in divorce proceedings in Singapore', Singapore Academy of Law Journal, 2018-01, Vol.30 (Special issue), p. 592.
[125] Anderson, D.Q. (2022) 'To negotiate, mediate or litigate? Examining the durability of divorce outcomes in the Singapore family courts', Family Court Review, 2022-07, Vol.60 (3), p. 436.
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[127] Ibid.
[128] Anderson, D.Q. (2022) 'To negotiate, mediate or litigate? Examining the durability of divorce outcomes in the Singapore family courts', Family Court Review, 2022-07, Vol.60 (3), p. 437.
[129] Anderson, D.Q. (2022) 'To negotiate, mediate or litigate? Examining the durability of divorce outcomes in the Singapore family courts', Family Court Review, 2022-07, Vol.60 (3), p. 43

therapy and marriage counselling. Singapore's Divorce Support Specialist Agencies (DSSAs) and Strengthening Families Programme at Family Service Centres (FAM@FSCs) offer several specialised programmes aimed at supporting divorced parents adjust to co-parenting after the divorce. (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2025) Through services such as the Mandatory Co-Parenting Programme, the Parenting PACT, Children in Between Programme, Supervised Exchange and Visitation Programme and Counselling and Support Programmes, divorced parents are able to work with trained counsellors and social workers through counselling efforts that prioritise the children's wellbeing, encourage an amicable and effective divorce outcome, and minimise the conflict and emotional distress of the divorce.[130]

These policies effectively seek to guide parties through the divorce process. For instance, before filing for divorce, divorcing parents with a child below the age of 21 must complete the Mandatory Co-Parenting Programme. Introduced by the Ministry of Social and Family Development in December 2016, the programme seeks to prioritise children's welfare. Through educational and consultation sessions facilitated by trained professionals from Divorce Support Specialist Agencies (DSSAs) who specialise in family therapy, child psychology and divorce mediation, the programme is composed of an E-Learning module and 1-3 counselling sessions.[131] In this way, the programme seeks to streamline the divorce process through reducing conflicts and aligning parental decisions.

Similarly, the Children of Divorce Intervention Programme (CODIP) similarly focuses on the wellbeing of the child. The programme is targeted at children aged between 7-12 and aims to support children through the divorce through 6 2-hour long educational sessions that offer emotional and psychological guidance.[132] By providing children with the skills to manage their emotions, the programme offers a 'safe platform for children to express and understand their feelings related to parents' divorce'.[133] Altogether, these policies reflect a strong post-divorce support system.

However, these measures, while extensive, primarily function post-divorce. This reflects the state's emphasis on reacting to marital breakdown, rather than preventing it. Indeed, this logic extends even prior to divorce, where many current pre-divorce support measures take on a therapeutic, resolution-focused approach. The Ministry of Social and Family Development, for instance, provides a range of counselling initiatives offered by the Strengthening Families Programme and the Family Service Centre, giving couples with marital issues the opportunity to work through their problems.[134] In line with this, during a speech on the Family Justice Bill in 2014, Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam, then Minister for Law, set out that one of the primary aims of the Family Justice System is to 'provide better support for families to resolve disputes'.[135]

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[130] Chettri, U. (2026) 'Mandatory Co-Parenting Programme (CPP) 2023', Singapore Divorce Lawyer. Available at: https://www.singaporedivorcelawyer.com.sg/mandatory-co-parenting-programme-cpp-2023/

[131] Ibid.

[132] Family Central (2024) 'Children of Divorce Intervention Programme (CODIP)', Family Central. Retrieved January 19, 2026, from https://family-central.sg/course/children-of-divorce-intervention-programme-codip/ (family-central.sg).

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). Strengthening Families Programme (FAM). Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore. Available at: https://www.msf.gov.sg/what-we-do/fam/home.

[135] Ministry of Law (2014) Speech by Minister on the Family Justice Bill. Singapore: Ministry of Law. Available at: https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-speeches/speech-by-minister-on-family-justice-bill/

As such, it is clear that both pre- and post-divorce systems are primarily concerned with conflict resolution. Because of this, existing systems often fail to appropriately address the specific individual, financial and emotional pressures that may cause such issues to arise in the first place. Furthermore, marriage is often isolated from wider societal systems, causing other contributing factors and patterns that lead to marital breakdown to be frequently misunderstood or ignored. As a result, the causes of marital dissolution often remain unaddressed, with limited attention paid to the specific pressures that lead to divorce in the first place.

Moreover, while current programmes emphasise support for children, they often overlook the pressures that are particular to the adults navigating the divorce. Adults are often positioned as caregivers rather than individuals experiencing their own specific emotional, financial and identity ruptures. As current programs, such as the Mandatory Co-Parenting Programme, the Parenting PACT and Children in Between Programme all prioritise child welfare, support for adults is oriented towards improving parental cooperation, rather than processing the end of their relationship. As a result, their personal struggles are often overlooked or treated as secondary. Similarly, while therapy is provided, as previously highlighted, pre- and post-divorce counselling often emphasises reducing acrimony. I argue that while effective in managing practical arrangements, this approach can often unintentionally fail to sufficiently support the more emotional distresses an adult may face through the divorce process.

Put together, while current divorce policies are effective in prioritising child welfare and harm reduction, the emphasis on conflict resolution is insufficient. In order to better support couples both before and after marital breakdown, a more preventive, rather than reactive, approach that considers adult-specific pressures is necessary.

Gendered Gaps

Moreover, the gendered experience of divorce exposes gaps in how marital dissolution is understood and managed. In *Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore*, 2012, Shirley Sun focuses on gendered differences regarding responses towards divorce, revealing key problems that the divorce process fails to solve. Significantly, she highlights how women are consistently the predominant gender to initiate divorce; in 2012, 64% of divorce cases were initiated by women.[136] This reveals a gendered dimension to marital breakdown that disproportionately drives women to initiate divorce. Sun's article posits that much of this dissatisfaction among women lies in their tendency to take on heavier domestic duties, a statistic supported by a study conducted by Dr Tan Poh Lin, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore. During her study, Dr Tan surveyed over 660 married women from 2018, and found that women in Singapore typically 'shoulder more housework', partly because it is 'generally considered 'women's work'.'[137] These inequalities became more visible during the COVID pandemic, when the number of minutes spent on household chores per day rose from 68 to 112 minutes among women, compared to 43 to 63 minutes among men.[138] Although gender inequality is not structurally embedded into the court system, these common patterns that emerge from lived experience suggest

[136] Sun, S.H.-L. (2014) 'Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore', Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Vol.45 (1), p.130.
[137] Tan, P. L. (2021) 'Women in Singapore less satisfied with their marriages during and after the circuit breaker: Study', The Straits Times, 26 May 2021. Available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/women-in-singapore-less-satisfied-with-their-marriages-during-covid-19-pandemic-study
[138] Ibid.

that existing policies may inadequately address the specific challenges, such as structural and relational pressures, that women may overwhelmingly face pre-divorce.

Moreover, despite primarily instigating divorce, women frequently experience immense financial and emotional burdens after the settlement, a sentiment equally reported by male interviewees.[139] This suggests that while pre-divorce support is insufficient, existing processes often also fail to adequately support divorcees. 8/10 of the women interviewed described facing more complex issues when there were long-term disagreements' over custody, property and maintenance issues.[140] Many women expressed discontent with this arrangement and the potential impact on their children's upbringing, arguing that this system enabled fathers to have time to solely have fun with their children, 'neglecting the other aspects of parenthood, such as children's welfare and discipline' while unfairly burdening mothers with discipline and daily care.[141]

Similarly, many male interviewees described feeling sidelined by the court processes, feeling that they lacked adequate emotional support through their divorce. In particular, while many female interviewees leaned on family and friends for support through the process, many men expressed experiencing the divorce alone, delaying their own mourning and having 'difficulty expressing their emotional distress' out of a desire to 'protect their families from the perceived and real emotional and psychological harms accompanying divorce, and to fulfil the male "protector" role' for their families.[142]

Although post-divorce frameworks have become more flexible and sensitive in recent years particularly through ensuring better attention is paid towards potential biases, family justice mechanisms remain limited in addressing broader structural pressures that shape family dynamics outside the courtroom.

Recommendations

Overall, the issues presented suggest the need for the implementation of better pre-and post-divorce support, particularly for adults. Policy reform should focus on preventive interventions that target specific issues that men and women may experience. While family policy regulations may have evolved in recent times to be fairer and more sensitive to gendered biases that may appear in court, the court nonetheless remains limited in how it accounts for structural gendered inequalities that exist outside the courtroom. In order to reflect a shift away from conflict management and towards prevention, wider societal shifts focused on structural inequalities and labour distributions are needed in order to fully realise more sustainable marriages in Singapore.

For instance, although the court seeks to provide divorcing parties with equal care and control over their children, this is constrained by wider economic patterns. As the World Bank's 2024 report indicates, levels of employment are generally higher among men as compared to women – with over

[139] Sun, S.H.-L. (2014) 'Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore', Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Vol.45 (1), p.130.
[140] Sun, S.H.-L. (2014) 'Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore', Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Vol.45 (1), p.132.
[141] Sun, S.H.-L. (2014) 'Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore', Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Vol.45 (1), p.140.
[142] Sun, S.H.-L. (2014) 'Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore', Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Vol.45 (1), p.139.

76.8% of men participating in the labour force in Singapore that year, compared to 62.3% of women, often making it unsustainable for an entirely balanced split of child custody between both parents to be implemented.[143] In this regard, certain familial policies, especially ones specific to gender, may be insufficient due to the constraints placed by wider societal systems.

As such, the restructuring of other broader societal issues beyond the family unit is needed to more deeply prevent issues that emerge in marriage. To do this, rather than primarily focusing on counselling measures, the state should focus on economic reforms that enable a better distribution of labour between men and women, particularly through incentivising more women to participate in the labour force and providing more effective and affordable daycare or alternative modes of support for children. While Singapore has invested significantly in early childcare, centralised through the Early Childhood Development Agency, this is still often expensive and limited, constraining its effectiveness as a facilitator of women's employment.[144]

Instead, improving work-life balance for individuals across sectors is crucial in better distributing caregiving and domestic duties between couples, reducing stress and increasing quality time spent together. This can be done through extending statutory work-hour limits and overtime protections to all workers including managers, executives, and all professionals, not just workmen and employees earning a maximum of $2,600/month.[145] Moreover, flexible work should be more formalised and evenly distributed. While employees are currently able to request flexible work arrangements under the Tripartite Guidelines, the approval of a request is not guaranteed, but strongly dependent on the decisions of employers. As such, flexibility is often unevenly distributed among workers, and may also come at a long-term career disadvantage due to a lack of protections against slower promotions, exclusion from projects or subtle biases from employees. Policies that protect workers and mandate employers to approve requests unless a refusal is objectively justified would more effectively permit flexibility for employers, allowing for a more flexible work-life balance for many and encouraging more women to work. This would benefit couples during marriage as well as post-divorce as labour and child custody is able to be more fairly distributed.

Overall, current measures that focus on post-divorce therapeutic support are often insufficient. Instead, addressing wider societal structural and economic issues that culminate in pressures during marriage is crucial in fostering sustainable and happier relationships.

Conclusion

The rise of divorce in Singapore is highly emblematic of the profound shifts in social values, economic pressures, and the changing expectations of individuals. As illustrated, Singapore's Family Justice System is primarily interested in efficiency, amicability and the protection of children's interests through divorce processes. However, the court's overwhelming post-divorce orientation and emphasis on children's welfare have significant gaps in addressing specific gendered pressures and issues in marriage that culminate in dissolution. Incorporating an approach towards family policy that addresses

[143] World Bank (2024) Gender data: Singapore. Available at: https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/singapore

[144] Early Childhood Development Agency (2025) About ECDA: Early childhood development in Singapore. Available at: https://www.ecda.gov.sg/

[145] L&E Global (2024) Employment law overview: Singapore – working conditions. Available at: https://leglobal.law/countries/singapore/employment-law/employment-law-overview-singapore/03-working-conditions/

problems that men and women face both before and after divorce may strengthen marital wellbeing, improve divorce outcomes, and support the families at the heart of Singaporean society.

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Justice, Meritocracy and Choice – On Fishkin's Trilemma and Singapore's 'trilemma profile'

Ng Kang Qi

1. Introduction and the conceptual 'ragbag'

A central tension facing political philosophy and policy discussion is the conceptual ambiguity surrounding concepts like 'meritocracy'. In wider political and sociological literature, there is a tendency to use 'meritocracy' to describe broad social systems or ideological outcomes that bundle a procedural notion of merit-based selection with other distributive and psychological ideas. This usage stems from the origin of the term, initially coined by Young (1958) to warn against dystopian social systems that justify and entrench social stratification.[146]

This tradition of analysing 'meritocracy' as a total social system is the common ground for both its contemporary critics and its analysts. It is the primary target for philosophers like Michael Sandel, who critiques 'meritocracy' as a corrosive public ideology.[147] This same broad, holistic framework is also adopted by analysts like Chua et al., who examine Singapore's 'meritocracy' as a "holistic principle" of both procedural and distributive justice.[148] The problem with this usage of 'meritocracy' is that it treats distinct (and to some degree mutually exclusive) normative and descriptive ideals as a singular concept. As Richards describes, the tendency for concepts to cluster together in a vague "ragbag" makes productive policy discussion impossible, as it leaves unclarified the distinct goals of stakeholders and the trade-offs that come with striving towards particular ideals.[149]

This paper aims to make use of Fishkin's trilemma as a tool for the reductive analysis of the distinct normative concepts associated with meritocracy. By framing the broad concept as distinct ideals with

[146] Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Thames and Hudson 1958).
[147] Michael J Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2020).
[148] Vincent Chua, Randall Morck and Bernard Yeung, 'The Singaporean Meritocracy: Theory, Practice and Policy Implications' (Draft Paper, 3 March 2020).
[149] Janet Radcliffe Richards, 'Equality of Opportunity' (1997) 10 Ratio (new series) 253.

various trade-offs, policies and their implications become more concrete to policymakers and stakeholders. Additionally, this paper will aim to make a methodological contribution (by measuring the philosophical trilemma through econometrics and policy analysis), a normative argument regarding the status of the three principles in Fishkin's trilemma, and a further claim of applied ethics that Singapore's profile places undue emphasis on the principle of merit and the autonomy of family at great expense of equality of life chances. This paper claims that this imbalanced trilemma profile compromises Singapore's pursuit of justice.

1.1 Fishkin's trilemma as a tool for reductive analysis

The notion of meritocracy, initially coined by Young, can be broken down into three distinct principles described by Fishkin's trilemma. Contextualised within this framework, Young and Sandel's critiques are shown not to be directed at the procedural notion of selection based on formal qualification (Fishkin's 'principle of merit'), but rather on a society's undue emphasis on procedural fairness at the expense of distributive and background fairness.

This paper will adopt terminology as used by Fishkin to profile the trade-offs each society must accept in its pursuit of justice. The key principles are as follows:

Principle of merit (POM): a principle of procedural fairness, described by Fishkin as "widespread procedural fairness in the evaluation of qualifications for positions." Crucially, the POM includes both negative and positive normative content – the evaluation of qualifications should *exclude* discrimination based on irrelevant factors (such as race, religion, and gender) and should *include* careful selection based on relevant qualifications.

Equality of life chances (ELC): a principle of background fairness, described by Fishkin as that "the prospects of children for eventual positions in society should not vary in any systematic and significant manner with their arbitrary native characteristics."

Autonomy of the family (AOF): a principle that limits government intervention in the familial sphere, which Fishkin describes as that "[c]onsensual relations within a given family governing the development of its children should not be coercively interfered with except to ensure for the children the essential prerequisites for adult participation in society."

2. Methodology: A three-dimensional framework for the trilemma

Fishkin describes the trilemma as one in which a greater achievement of any two of the principles (between POM, ELC and AOF) will lead to a considerable sacrifice in achievement of the third. He acknowledges that the achievement of these principles is a matter of extent; different policies can emphasise each principle to varying degrees and with different levels of success. The proposed methodology here is to make explicit the degrees to which each of these three principles is satisfied through qualitative and quantitative measures. In this section, three metrics for evaluation will be chosen and explained for each of the three principles. It is important to note the limitations of such a methodology. Fishkin's philosophical principles cannot be easily quantified, and the indicators used below will be empirical proxies that can only approximate the degree to which a principle is achieved. Nevertheless, the hope is that these empirical measures will be adequate for sketching the general shape of Singapore's trilemma profile.

2.1 Principle of merit

While the POM is a purely procedural ideal, its widespread implementation produces distinct economic outcomes. Namely, since the principle mandates that positions be allocated based on relevant qualifications, institutional adherence to the POM will empirically manifest as a high 'educational wage premium', confirming that the market sorts and rewards individuals based on credentials. The negative component of the ideal – that of the absence of discrimination – will be measured through the qualitative measure of the 'equal treatment and absence of discrimination' index.[150] The positive component, or the filling of positions based on qualifications, will also be measured qualitatively through the 'reliance on professional management' index.[151]

2.2 Equality of life chances

Similar to the principle of merit, there are no direct metrics for measuring equality of life chances, an ideal with multifaceted demands for certain procedural, social and distributive outcomes. However, a major heuristic available is to describe it as an epistemic notion, where knowledge of a child's initial social and economic conditions should not allow one to predict their future outcomes with great probability. Three indicators will approximate this heuristic: Intergenerational Income Elasticity (IGE), Educational Mobility and the wealth Gini coefficient. Intergenerational Income Elasticity

[150] World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2024* (World Justice Project 2024) https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2024/Singapore/ accessed 18 November 2025.
[151] Ministry of Manpower, 'Singapore Labour Market Competitiveness Rises to First Place in 2024' (Ministry of Manpower, 2024) https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Singapore-Labour-Market-Competitiveness-2024.aspx accessed 18 November 2025.

measures the variance in a child's initial socio-economic background and their future economic background. Educational Mobility reveals chances for social mobility in societies with high levels of educational coverage (such as in Singapore), and the wealth Gini coefficient reveals the degree to which advantages are carried over across generations.

2.3 Autonomy of family

As a negative concept that implies minimal government intervention in child-rearing, there are few corresponding quantitative measures available. However, one quantitative method of approximating the principle is by measuring household expenditure on private and supplementary education, which demonstrates the degree to which families are allowed to secure advantages for future generations through autonomous spending. Two qualitative measures will also be employed: analysis of tax policies on intergenerational wealth transfers, and legal thresholds for state intervention in child-rearing.

3. Case study: Singapore's trilemma profile

Fishkin's trilemma is based on the assumptions of 'ideal theory', which requires a society that possesses 'moderate scarcity' or 'strict compliance'. As Fishkin describes, moderate scarcity is such that "natural and other resources are not so abundant that schemes of cooperation become superfluous, nor are conditions so harsh that fruitful ventures must inevitably break down. While mutually advantageous arrangements are feasible, the benefits they yield fall short of the demands men put forward." 'Strict compliance', on the other hand, is described as a set of societal conditions where "everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions". [152]

Based on the above description, we can be almost certain that Singapore fits Fishkin's description of ideal theory and should adhere to the hypothesised outcomes of the trilemma. The robust economic conditions of modern Singapore, while far from reaching utopian heights, ensure that mutually cooperative ventures are fruitful, while strong political institutions and the rule of law form a good approximation of strict compliance.[153] The empirical findings of Singapore's trilemma profile, to be presented in the following sections, will detail how Singapore fits within Fishkin's framework.

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[152] Fishkin (n 1) 46.

[153] Fishkin's definition of strict compliance is an ideal that is probably out of reach for any society. Although Singapore does not meet utopian expectations and faces its fair share of white-collar crime, it forms a close practical approximation, with crime rates consistently among the lowest globally. According to the Global Organised Crime Index, Singapore's criminality score ranks 3rd lowest in Asia and 30th lowest globally. For greater nuance, see 'Singapore' (Global Organized Crime Index) https://ocindex.net/country/singapore accessed 8 January 2026.

3.1 Singapore's achievement of the principle of merit

The data suggests that Singapore places a strong emphasis on the achievement of the POM, with the market rewarding formal qualifications and a strong indication that there is both an absence of discrimination and a careful selection based on qualification in the public and private sectors.

Educational Wage Premium:

The Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) "Labour Force in Singapore 2024" report breaks down the median gross monthly income of full-time employed residents based on educational level.

Fig. 1: Median gross monthly income by educational level[154]

Qualification	Median gross monthly income
Degree	S$8,656
Diploma and Professional Qualification	S$5,000
Secondary	S$3,510
Below Secondary	S$2,522

Based on the above, there is a clear indication that each additional layer of educational qualification provides a greater absolute increase in income. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted in 2024, the largest absolute gaps in hourly pay between high-skilled and low-skilled workers were found in Singapore and the United States.[155]

Equal treatment and absence of discrimination:

Singapore ranks 6th globally and 1st regionally in the equal treatment and absence of discrimination index (sub-factor 4.1), a component of the World Justice Project's *Fundamental Rights* factor under the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, with an index score of 0.81/1.00.[156] The index is a qualitative measure collected through surveys of both the general public and in-country legal experts, which specifically assesses whether individuals are free from discrimination in employment, public

[154] Ministry of Manpower, 'Labour Force in Singapore 2024' (Manpower Research & Statistics Department, 27 January 2025) https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS_PdfLibrary/mrsd_2024LabourForce_survey_findings.pdf accessed 18 November 2025.
[155] OECD, 'Review Education Policies - Education GPS - OECD: Earnings' https://gpseducation.oecd.org/revieweducationpolicies/#!node=41766&filter=all accessed 18 November 2025.
[156] World Justice Project (n 6).

services, and the civil justice system based on factors like socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and religion.[157]

Singapore's high score of 0.81 and its 6th global rank indicate a strong societal and legal commitment to this negative procedural ideal. It suggests that the formal processes of evaluation are perceived as neutral and non-discriminatory, and that Singapore fulfils the negative component of the POM to a large degree.

Reliance on Professional Management:

In the 2024 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook, Singapore ranked 1st overall, driven by a 1st place in "Labour Market Competitiveness" and 2nd place in both "Government Efficiency" and "Business Efficiency". These rankings are based on surveys of business leaders, reflecting a high perception of "competent senior managers" and a low degree of favouritism or corruption.[158] This reflects a strong achievement of the positive component of the POM, suggesting that positions of advantage in Singaporean society are secured through genuine qualifications and competency.

3.2 Singapore's achievement of equality of life chances

The data here is mixed. While Singapore performs well on baseline education, the key intergenerational metrics point to a society with only 'moderately low' mobility and very high wealth inequality.

Intergenerational Income Elasticity (IGE):

Academic studies by Ng et al. (2009) estimate Singapore's IGE to be 0.26.[159] This is described as "moderately low" mobility, estimated to be higher (indicating less mobility) than countries like Canada and the Scandinavian countries, but similar to that of the United States.[160] Of note, IGE is a lagging indicator, with the work of Ling et al. (2018) indicating that Singapore's intergenerational mobility is decreasing over time.[161]

Educational Mobility:

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[157] World Justice Project, 'Our Work' https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data accessed 18 November 2025.
[158] Ministry of Manpower (n 7).
[159] Irene YH Ng, Xiaoyi Shen and Kong Weng Ho, 'Intergenerational Earnings Mobility in Singapore and the United States' (2009) 20 Journal of Asian Economics 110.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Meng Ling and others, 'Intergenerational Income Mobility in Singapore' in *Inequality and Growth in the Asian Century* (International Monetary Fund 2018).

A 2015 government paper found that 14% of children born to the bottom 20% of families by income were able to move into the top 20% as working adults.[162] This is comparatively high, compared to 11.7% in Denmark, 9% in the United Kingdom, and 9.7% in the United States. Crucially, however, this indicator is also lagging, as it applies only to men born between 1978 and 1982.

Wealth Gini Coefficient:

Singapore's wealth Gini coefficient reached 70 in 2023 (on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is perfect inequality), up from 57 in 2008. This high wealth inequality is starkly illustrated by the divergence in mean and median wealth. From 2008 to 2023, Singapore's mean wealth per adult rose by 116%, while the median wealth per adult fell by 2%. This suggests that the increase in wealth is overwhelmingly concentrated in the higher wealth brackets.[163]

3.3 Autonomy of the Family (AOF)

The data points to an extremely high, and legally protected, degree of family autonomy, particularly in the ability to transfer advantages to children.

Tax Policies on Intergenerational Wealth Transfers

Singapore abolished its inheritance tax (known as Estate Duty) for deaths on or after February 15, 2008, such that the tax rate is now 0%.[164] This is in contrast to countries like Japan (which has the highest top marginal rate for lineal heirs in the OECD at 55%), South Korea (50%), France (45%), and the United Kingdom (40%).[165]

This policy choice places Singapore in the camp of countries that have repealed inheritance taxes, signalling a clear prioritisation of the AOF to transfer wealth across generations without state interference.

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[162] 'Singapore's Quest for Social Mobility: Can Education and Policy Keep It Going?' *The Straits Times* (Singapore, 4 October 2025) https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/singapores-quest-for-social-mobility-can-education-and-policy-keep-it-going accessed 18 November 2025; 'Measures to Enhance Income Mobility and Reduce Income Inequality' (Telescope.gov.sg) https://telescope.gov.sg/transcript/7978 accessed 18 November 2025.

[163] 'Wealth Inequality in Singapore Surpasses Other APAC Nations' *Singapore Business Review* (Singapore, 10 July 2024) https://sbr.com.sg/markets-investing/news/wealth-inequality-in-singapore-surpasses-other-apac-nations accessed 18 November 2025.

[164] Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, 'Estate Duty' https://www.iras.gov.sg/taxes/other-taxes/estate-duty/estate-duty accessed 18 November 2025.

[165] Tax Foundation, 'Estate and Inheritance Taxes around the World' (Tax Foundation, 17 March 2015) https://taxfoundation.org/research/all/federal/estate-and-inheritance-taxes-around-world/ accessed 18 November 2025.

Household Expenditure on Private and Supplementary Education

Singaporean families spent S$1.8 billion on private tuition in 2023, a significant increase from S$1.4 billion in 2018.[166] This spending is highly unequal: the top 20% of households by income spent an average of S$162.60 per month on tuition, while the bottom 20% spent S$36.30 per month.[167]

Critically, Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) acknowledged this disparity but stated it is "not in a position to intervene in such personal decisions," a direct confirmation of the state's deference to family autonomy.[168]

Legal Threshold for State Intervention in Child-Rearing:

The Children and Young Persons Act 1993 (CYPA)[169] governs state intervention in child-rearing. The law explicitly states the guiding principle that "parents or guardian... are primarily responsible for the care and welfare of the child".[170] The legal threshold for "coercive interference" is high, requiring the state to prove the child needs care or protection, such as if the parent is "unable or has neglected to provide adequate food, clothing, medical aid, lodging, care or other necessities of life".[171] This aligns with Fishkin's condition of minimal intervention with the exception of "essential prerequisites".

3.4 A summary of Singapore's trilemma profile

A summary of the above evaluative metrics contextualised within Fishkin's framework provides a rough idea of Singapore's 'trilemma profile'. Singapore does especially well on achieving the POM and AOF, with strong qualitative and quantitative indicators that imply a heavy emphasis on the principle of merit and a well-protected sphere of family autonomy. However, it does so at the cost of neglecting the ELC, as seen by the relatively poor IGE and wealth Gini coefficient figures. Especially concerning is the sharp rise in the wealth Gini coefficient, and while IGE and educational mobility metrics are inherently lagging, they indicate a similarly troubling decline in intergenerational mobility.

Historical reasons for Singapore's trilemma profile

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[166] 'Spending by S'pore Families on Private Tuition Rises to $1.8 Billion in 2023' *The Straits Times* (Singapore, 19 January 2025) https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-families-spent-1-8-billion-on-private-tuition-for-children-in-2023 accessed 18 November 2025.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ministry of Education, 'Private Tuition' (Parliamentary Replies, 5 February 2024) https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-replies/20250205-private-tuition accessed 18 November 2025.
[169] *Children and Young Persons Act 1993*.
[170] *Children and Young Persons (Amendment) Act 2011*.
[171] *Children and Young Persons Act 1993*, s 4(c).

So far, Fishkin's hypothesis seems to have held up to scrutiny in the face of empirical findings.[172] However, given the context of Singapore's development post-independence, Singapore's present-day trilemma profile is unsurprising. With the need for rapid economic development post-independence, policy choices that prioritised productivity and incentivised work were sorely needed. Prioritising the POM and AOF guaranteed this by promising greater prospects for oneself and their future generations if one worked hard and accrued the relevant skills and qualifications.

Before reaching its present state of affluence, the emphasis of POM and AOF in Singapore did not necessarily compromise ELC in a problematic way. By allowing for accelerated economic development, policies that prioritised the POM and the AOF allowed for the development of a robust educational infrastructure, which arguably enhanced mobility for the least well-off in society. This standout educational outcome is also reflected in the relative performance of the bottom quartile income students. Specifically, the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that students from Singapore's bottom 25% of socio-economic status (SES) homes outperformed the overall OECD average – a benchmark representing students from all income levels in all three domains of mathematics, science, and reading.[173]

This demonstrates that for a time, Singapore's model was not so much a trade-off as a virtuous cycle: prioritising POM and AOF led to economic growth, which funded a world-class public education system that in turn bolstered ELC, creating higher social mobility. It is only upon achieving its status as a developed nation that Singapore's prioritisation of the POM and AOF began to come at a measurable sacrifice of the ELC.

3.5 The problem with the present-day profile

Viewed through a historical lens, Singapore's profile appears to be the result of inevitable trade-offs. The post-independence necessity for rapid economic development understandably prioritised the principle of merit and the autonomy of the family to incentivise work and productivity. It might therefore be tempting to view Singapore's resulting profile as simply one option amongst a multitude

[172] It should be noted that while the empirical data seem to align with Fishkin's theoretical predictions, these findings are diagnostic rather than definitive. The use of proxy indicators (such as wage premiums for merit) and the presence of lagging data (IGE) mean that while a correlation is strongly observed, a strict causal link cannot be conclusively proven without further longitudinal study.

[173] Ministry of Education, 'Annex A: PISA 2022' (Press Release, 5 December 2023) https://www.moe.gov.sg/-/media/files/news/press/2023/annex-a---pisa-2022.pdf accessed 18 November 2025.

of normatively equivalent political arrangements - a discretionary choice between competing but legitimate values.

However, in this section, I will argue that this view is demonstrably incorrect. While Fishkin's trilemma demonstrates that no society can fully satisfy all three principles, it does not imply that all trilemma configurations are normatively equivalent. Specifically, a profile that excessively prioritises the POM to the point of systematically eroding the ELC violates the necessary balance required for a just society.

The central normative point here is that imbalanced profiles lead to inherently unjust outcomes. This is because the normative value of the three principles is interdependent: the value of any individual principle relies on a threshold of achievement of the others to sustain a just political community. An imbalanced prioritisation does not merely sacrifice the third principle; it paradoxically undermines the normative weight of the prioritised principles themselves.

Interdependence of the principles

Firstly, consider the principle of merit. Its normative value lies in two areas: its negative component (the procedural requirement that institutions be free from discrimination) and its positive utility in promoting efficiency. However, neither component confers absolute validity. While the negative component is a necessary condition for fairness, the positive pursuit of efficiency is instrumental: valid only insofar as it secures the material basis for a distinctively human life. If the pursuit of efficiency through meritocratic sorting results in stratification so deep that it erodes the social basis of self-respect for the least advantaged, the principle loses its broader normative justification.

Secondly, equality of life Chances is similarly constrained. A pursuit of equality that neglects the efficiency considerations of the POM risks material deprivation that undermines the cooperative scheme itself, creating an 'equality of poverty'. Furthermore, ELC achieved by abolishing the AOF would require intrusive state intervention that violates fundamental liberties of association. Thus, ELC relies on the constraints provided by the other two principles to remain a viable political goal.

Finally, while the autonomy of the family is a vital expression of negative liberty, it cannot be pursued at the cost of all other claims of justice. If the exercise of family autonomy systematically dismantles ELC for others, it creates a hereditary structure that undermines the conditions for fair competition. In such cases, the AOF exceeds its valid scope by creating a system of stratification that stunts the

ability of some future adults to pursue their own good. This ultimately erodes the basis of society as a cooperative scheme, for a system that consistently excludes the least advantaged can no longer be justified as a mutually beneficial arrangement among equals.

Consequently, none of the principles can be pursued in isolation, nor even as pairs, at the risk of creating imbalanced profiles that threaten just social cooperation. Having established that the validity of any trilemma profile rests on the interdependence of its principles, we are now poised to examine difficulties particular to Singapore's specific imbalance. The current profile places an exceptional burden on the principle of merit to justify social outcomes. However, when stripped of the corrective balance of ELC, the POM reveals itself to be a deeply insufficient moral framework. As I will argue in the following section, relying on meritocratic procedure alone fails to account for the arbitrary nature of 'desert,' ultimately ratifying unfair advantages.

The insufficiency of the POM

The case against the POM can be made through a Rawlsian critique that it fails to properly factor in concerns of moral desert. The qualifications that the POM rewards are, in themselves, the product of factors that Rawls would call "arbitrary from a moral point of view".[174] An individual's "merit" (their qualifications, talent, and even their "willingness to make an effort") is the result of a "natural lottery" (innate talents) and a "social lottery" (family and class). Without correcting for some of these arbitrary background factors, the POM merely distributes positions of advantage to those already born to superior circumstances.

As Williams illustrates, purely procedural ideals cannot in themselves ensure a just society.[175] One can imagine a 'warrior society' in which a procedurally fair competition is created to select the strongest warriors. However, the children of the wealthy always win because they are "well nourished," while the poor are "so undernourished that they fail... for lack of strength". The system, despite being procedurally fair, is distributively unjust because it ratifies an "arbitrary" background condition (nutrition). While the resultant output (of creating the strongest warriors) is an indicator that the society is productive, the manifest failure to achieve a degree of distributive fairness is a severe deficiency of such a society.

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[174] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (revised edn, Belknap Press 1999) 63-64.
[175] Bernard Williams, 'The Idea of Equality' in Peter Laslett and WG Runciman (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society, Second Series* (Basil Blackwell 1962).

An analogous occurrence (albeit far less egregious) can be observed in the case of Singapore, where a high POM coupled with a high AOF allows for the transfer of advantages across generations, with a growing S$1.8 billion private educational market enabling those privileged to vie for advantage in formal educational qualification, akin to the "superior nourishment" in Williams's example. Although this results in the development of a large number of educated citizens (as seen through the OECD study), there is significant distributive unfairness. As Prime Minister Lawrence Wong acknowledges, education, a historical leveller of advantage, "is becoming an 'arms race' for parents who fear their children will lose out," resulting in earlier opportunity gaps due to the advantages of the well-to-do.[176]

Furthermore, the opportunity gaps resulting from early competitive advantages are especially problematic because they are not confined to a single "Moment of Equal Opportunity" (MEO). As Chambers describes, "each outcome is another opportunity," meaning that the outcome of initial educational competition is not a static reward but a further opportunity to access better networks, faster skill acquisition, and hence steeper wage trajectories.[177] This leads to a deeper and far more pronounced stratification over time, between individuals with already unequal starting positions.

Fig. 2: Median Gross monthly income by age and educational level[178]

Qualification	Age 25-29	Age 30-39	Age 40-49	Age 50-59
Degree	S$6,500	S$9,000	S$11,000	S$11,250
Diploma	S$4,000	S$5,100	S$5,700	S$5,800
Secondary	S$2,800	S$3,200	S$3,300	S$3,150

The income gap between a degree holder and a secondary school leaver more than doubles over their careers. The "fairly won" outcome of the MEO (a university degree) becomes a new, unequal opportunity for access to better jobs, networks, and skill development, leading to a great divergence that stratifies society over time.

[176] 'Singapore's Quest for Social Mobility' (n 18).
[177] Clare Chambers, 'Each Outcome is Another Opportunity: Problems with the Moment of Equal Opportunity' (2009) 8 Politics, Philosophy & Economics 374.
[178] Ministry of Manpower, 'Labour Force in Singapore 2023' (Manpower Research & Statistics Department, 31 January 2024) https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS_PdfLibrary/mrsd_2023LabourForce.pdf accessed 18 November 2025; 'What's The Median Salary In Singapore (At Every Age, Gender, Education and Race)' (DollarsAndSense.sg, 26 January 2024) https://dollarsandsense.sg/whats-median-salary-singapore-every-age-gender-education-race/ accessed 18 November 2025.

The stability of the system and the need for top-down change

Despite the substantial injustice that can result from the imbalanced trilemma profile discussed above, changes towards a country's priorities are difficult to implement and must be 'top-down'. As Sandel would argue, the perceived fairness of a society that prioritises the POM over the ELC leads to the general belief amongst the advantaged that their success is properly deserved.[179] This "meritocratic hubris" creates complacency and resistance to the redistributive demands of the ELC. The procedural success of the POM thus becomes the primary ideological barrier to achieving distributive justice.

A further point is that the system becomes self-perpetuating by influencing the ambitions of the disadvantaged. As Arneson suggests, an unequal social structure can "stunt the ambition" of those at the bottom, creating a social norm that enforces the idea that competition is 'not for them' from the beginning.[180] This means that even with an eventual shift towards material redistribution for the least well-off, significant efforts towards ideological change must be enacted before ELC can be achieved.

3.6 Suggestions for trilemma adjustment

It is crucial that one does not misinterpret the above critiques of the principle of merit as a claim that there exists a superior principle of procedural fairness, or an endorsement of what some might call 'equality of outcome'. The point is that the POM, for all its merits, neglects aspects of what a just society would uphold. However, there are several *prima facie* ways in which Singapore can adjust (and indeed is adjusting) its trilemma profile towards a greater emphasis on ELC without disproportionately compromising the other principles.

Addressing the "Arms Race" in Education

Recent reforms, such as the removal of mid-year exams and the shift to full Subject-Based Banding, are attempts to reduce the granular competitiveness that fuels the "arms race." However, as Chua et al. argue, any specific metric used for meritocratic selection is vulnerable to Goodhart's Law: "any number used in policy decisions soon ceases to be useful for policy decisions".[181] If there are high-stakes selection mechanisms, parents will use their autonomy to bypass the metric by allocating resources to the test or portfolio requirement that is in place.

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[179] Sandel (n 3).
[180] Richard J Arneson, 'Against Rawlsian Equality of Opportunity' (1999) 93 Philosophical Studies 77.
[181] Chua, Morck and Yeung (n 4).

Therefore, simply changing how we test is insufficient. A more robust approach to ELC would require addressing the large private tuition market.

Option 1 (Restriction): Controlling or capping the private tuition industry. This would be a direct sacrifice of AOF (parental liberty to spend) to secure ELC.

Option 2 (Design): Designing school systems to minimise the advantages tuition can provide. However, this is structurally difficult due to Goodhart's Law; parents will inevitably find a way to secure advantages for their children.

Housing as a Lever for Mobility

Housing policy offers a proven pathway to improve ELC. A study by Agarwal et al. (2023) on Singapore's public housing demonstrates that affordable housing does more than provide shelter. It "frees up budget constraints for disadvantaged families," allowing them to increase "human capital investment in children" (e.g. educational spending).[182] Continued investment in housing affordability for the bottom quintile is a direct investment in ELC. It allows lower-income parents to exercise their AOF more effectively, narrowing the gap with the wealthy.

Contextualising the principle of merit

A more radical adjustment would be to factor in an applicant's socio-economic circumstances when evaluating 'merit'. Instead of straightforward procedural fairness in evaluating qualifications, the system could make adjustments that recognise the adversity faced by the least advantaged.

Singapore has already tacitly admitted the need for this through "Aptitude-Based Admissions" (ABA), where universities consider how applicants have "overcome setbacks".[183] The country has also structurally intervened to allow for priority admission for lower-income children in MOE Kindergartens. However, these remain limited in scope.

[182] Sumit Agarwal and others, 'Like Father Like Son? Social Engineering and Intergenerational Mobility in Housing Consumption' (National University of Singapore 2023) https://ireus.nus.edu.sg/public-housing-intergenerational-mobility/ accessed 18 November 2025.
[183] 'NUS and NTU Cast Wider Net for Students through Aptitude-Based Admissions' *The Straits Times* (Singapore, 5 February 2024) https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nus-and-ntu-cast-wider-net-for-students-through-aptitude-based-admissions accessed 18 November 2025.

For a more dramatic change in the trilemma profile, Singapore has to expand these nascent policies into a systematic framework, potentially formalising entry adjustments or 'adversity scores' to counterweight the cumulative privilege of the wealthy

However, as with any policy, there will be necessary trade-offs with such policies. The first trade-off is that this explicitly sacrifices the efficiency of the POM for the sake of distributive justice. Secondly, it creates the risk of stigmatisation, where the achievements of beneficiaries are questioned. Finally, measuring 'disadvantage' is a challenging epistemological exercise, potentially making implementation costly or otherwise burdensome. Simple metrics (e.g., housing type) risk becoming a target for Goodhart's Law (e.g., families strategically positioning assets) or missing nuances (such as families who are wealthy but cash-poor).

4. Conclusion

Applying Fishkin's trilemma as an analytical tool has provided an added layer of clarity for policy decisions and their trade-offs and contextualised the often-cited deficiencies of 'meritocracy'. In using empirical metrics to profile Singapore's position within the trilemma, the paper has found an imbalance in Singapore's priorities, which emphasises achievement in autonomy of the family and the principle of merit (as a procedural ideal) at the expense of equality of life chances. While this trilemma profile is arguably the result of historical necessity, I have argued that without change in the present state of affairs, there will be increased strain and stratification, as well as a large degree of distributive injustice. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the trilemma, adjustments towards achieving a greater degree of equality of life chances will result in inevitable trade-offs, and there is no obvious 'optimum' set of policies to adopt. However, starting with some degree of educational reform will go a long way in helping Singapore become a more balanced and just state.

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The Need For More Means-Tested Government Scholarships in Singapore

Ong Juin Hsiung

I. Introduction

For the past few decades, finding the 'best and brightest' in Singapore and recruiting them to join the civil service has been the cornerstone of government policy. The primary way the government has done this is through public service scholarships. These are bonded scholarships which assess applicants on purely meritocratic criteria, in an effort to identify and recruit talented individuals in return for fully sponsoring the cost of their degrees.

On the other hand, means-tested civil service scholarships which add an income ceiling as a part of their criteria are virtually non-existent. This article seeks to argue that the government should implement more means-tested civil service scholarships. It will do so by exploring the social benefits these scholarships confer upon underprivileged students, political benefits to the government including the strengthening of the civil service itself, and the decrease in the phenomenon of bond-breaking such means-testing would cause. Finally, the article will seek to challenge the reasoning underpinning scholarships that are purely meritocratic.

A. Scholarships vs Bursaries

It is useful at the outset of this article to distinguish between scholarships and bursaries. Virtually all local universities provide bursaries or other forms of financial aid to students who require it, and these are supplemented by initiatives from the government[184]. Thus, at first glance, it may seem as if there already exists an avenue for students from low-income families to obtain higher education. However, there are two key distinctions between scholarships and bursaries. A difference that should not be overlooked is that bursaries are university-specific; this means that the opportunity to study abroad is locked behind scholarships unless one's university of choice provides financial assistance of their own. The most significant difference, though, is that public service scholarships also represent a recognition of promise or talent, so much so that obtaining one guarantees a position in the civil service. Conversely, bursaries simply aim to support students who require financial assistance.

[184] LifeSG, 'Government Bursaries for Higher Education' <https://supportgowhere.life.gov.sg/schemes/FTNt6bee/government-bursaries-higher-education> accessed 17 November 2025.

II. Social benefits

Having said that, it is submitted that a fundamental goal of scholarships, especially government scholarships, should be to provide financial aid to those who need it. Currently, underprivileged students are forced to compete with students who can already pay for university, causing some students who need the scholarship to study overseas to lose out on the opportunity to do so. With more means-tested scholarships, more talented students would be able to attend the best universities in the world, enabling them to push themselves to their full potential whilst being unhampered by financial limitations.

Detractors may contend that local universities have established themselves as some of the best in the world, with NUS and NTU ranked in the top 15 in the latest QS World Rankings[185]. This would seem to indicate that the existing bursary system already provides these underprivileged talents a pathway to a world-class education, diminishing the need for means-tested scholarships. Nevertheless, even the staunchest supporters of local universities must recognise that they must bow out to overseas universities in certain areas, at least at present. For instance, local universities simply take in too many students to have the intimate one-to-two tutorial system Oxbridge prides itself upon, which might be the perfect environment for certain students to develop their ideas. Nor can local universities match Stanford's proximity to Silicon Valley, or the connections it has to the biggest tech firms in the world through the Stanford Research Park[186]. Thus, overseas universities can be better positioned to develop the brightest Singaporean talent, emphasising the significance of giving underprivileged talent the chance to attend them.

Opening up additional opportunities in this manner bears great social significance. It is in essence a decree that anyone, no matter their background, is capable of attaining a first-class education and the prospects that come with it so long as they work hard. It is especially crucial for government scholarships in particular to have this goal in mind, as they are some of the only ways in which this goal may be realised. Few other entities other than the government have the ability or desire to create a scheme tailored to assist disadvantaged talent: private companies, the other prime scholarship provider, are incentivised to gear their selection process to identify and retain the very best rather than support those who truly need it. While the government does also seek to recruit promising individuals, it uniquely owes a duty to render support to citizens who require it and promote positive social change. Thus, supporting underprivileged talent through means-tested scholarships lies squarely within its interests. If the government, the one entity ought to be most concerned with creating these opportunities, fails to do so, few other options remain for bright individuals from poor backgrounds.

[185] QS, 'QS World University Rankings 2026: Top Global Universities' (Top Universities) <https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings> accessed 7 January 2026

[186] Stanford Research Park, 'About • Stanford Research Park' <https://stanfordresearchpark.com/about/> accessed 7 January 2026

Additionally, it must be emphasised that the introduction of more means-tested scholarships is not incompatible with the goal of recruiting promising talent to the civil service. Capable individuals exist at every income level. In fact, Singapore is renowned for having an excellent public education system, with some of its best schools being public schools which charge heavily government-subsidised fees[187]. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education also provides financial assistance to citizens who need help with these fees[188]. This means that every student, regardless of financial background, can receive the best education the country has to offer, resulting in the nurturing of brilliant individuals across income levels. Visibly, implementing an income ceiling for government scholarships does not need to compromise on applicant capability. Instead, the introduction of such scholarships could allow the government to tap into reserves of talent that would otherwise be overlooked. Even if the quality of individuals recruited to the civil service were to drop drastically after the implementation of a means test, this would not undermine the means test itself. Instead, this illustrates a concentration of talent amongst the wealthy, a clear indicator that Singapore's education system systemically disadvantages the poor, a separate matter which should be resolved.

A possible point of contention could be that existing government scholarships already provide a pathway for low-income students to study at elite universities abroad. After all, these scholarships are merit-based, and are open to anyone regardless of their financial background. However, while fair on paper, this purely meritocratic approach is unfortunately intrinsically flawed. This is because the standards of academic achievement and extracurricular excellence which government scholarships currently use as criteria to screen candidates[189] put low-income students at an inherent disadvantage. Poorer students are more likely to have other factors in their lives which forcibly divert their attention away from their studies. For instance, poor students are more likely to act as informal caregivers for their family members[190], and are also more likely to have to take up a part-time job to supplement household income[191]. These stressors not only sap physical and mental energy, but also impinge on studying time, making attaining perfect grades much more difficult for these students.

The additional criteria of excellence in 'non-academic pursuits'[192] is even more crushing for poor students. The aforementioned constraints can make it impossible for students to commit the large

[187] Ministry of Education, 'Financial Assistance' (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2025) <https://www.moe.gov.sg/financial-matters/financial-assistance> accessed 7 January 2026.
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[192] Public Service Commission Singapore, 'PSC Scholarships' <https://www.psc.gov.sg/scholarships/undergraduate-scholarships/psc-scholarships> accessed 15 November 2025.

chunks of time needed to collect the accolades scholarship bodies are currently looking for. A student struggling to make ends meet is unlikely to have the time to demonstrate their leadership skills by running a society, or delve into the supercurricular syllabus of an Olympiad to showcase their technical proficiency.

Therefore, it is evident that the current merit-based scholarships fail to provide an equal opportunity to low-income talents as they are simply not in a position to compete with students whose resources vastly outnumber their own. This is deeply unfair as these students are denied a chance to study abroad through no fault of their own—there is no telling how capable these students would have been had they had access to the same opportunities. Thus, it is clear that more means-tested scholarships which exclusively support these individuals must be implemented.

Overall, creating more means-tested scholarships yield great social benefit. This ensures that underprivileged students have access to a world-class education, granting them social mobility and supporting budding talents in our community.

III. Political benefits

Even though the introduction of more means-tested scholarships seems to predominantly be a social initiative, it has extensive political benefits as well. For instance, more means-tested scholarships would invariably lead to a wider variety of income backgrounds within the civil service. This is invaluable for a number of reasons.

A. Diversity of thought within the civil service

Firstly, this wider representation would result in increased diversity of thought. Historically, the bulk of government scholarship recipients have been from elite schools, most notably Raffles Institution and Hwa Chong Institution. In a recent Public Service Commission report, over 64% of scholars were from the two schools[193]. In addition, over the past 5 years, only one President's Scholar was not from either school[194].

This is not to say that none of these students were from underprivileged backgrounds. Instead, this merely indicates that there is a dearth of students who have been educated in a different environment within the civil service. Given that talented students from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely

[193] Public Service Commission Singapore, 'Public Service Commission Annual Reports' <https://www.psc.gov.sg/resources/annual-reports> accessed 15 November 2025.
[194] Public Service Commission Singapore, 'Public Service Commission Annual Reports' <https://www.psc.gov.sg/resources/annual-reports> accessed 15 November 2025.

to be from a more diverse subset of schools[195], they could be better positioned to introduce fresh perspectives into the civil service.

Another way these individuals would promote diversity of thought within the civil service is through the differences in their upbringing. Naturally, individuals from lower income backgrounds would have an entirely different upbringing than the average scholar—they would face different challenges and as a result, hold different lived experiences. These different lived experiences would result in intrinsically different worldviews and values, bringing novel ideas and perspectives to the civil service. Moreover, this uniqueness in perspective would only be accentuated by an overseas education. These individuals' novel outlook would only be further developed by overseas experiences exposing them to cultures outside of their own, which would not be possible without a scholarship.

This diversity of thought is crucial to a system like the civil service. The civil service is responsible for a broad range of work, from implementing and refining policies to advising ministers. The advice of senior civil servants can even guide and inform ministers' choices[196], highlighting the deeply important and influential role they play. Consequently, it is of paramount importance that the civil service is composed of individuals with different ideas. Increased diversity of thought would not only allow for the construction of more nuanced policies, but would also help the government overcome novel problems. The heightened adaptability granted to the civil service by the influx of different perspectives is especially significant given the accelerated pace at which the world is developing. With leaps forward in fields like artificial intelligence and bioengineering, it is imperative that our civil service possesses the flexibility and creativity to keep up with these advancements, and diversity of thought is a necessary condition for this.

Therefore, the diversity of thought achieved by recruiting the underrepresented low-income individuals via means-tested scholarships is clearly a huge boon as it ensures that the machinery of the civil service runs smoothly.

B. A civil service more in touch with its people

More low-income individuals within the civil service would allow for people who have experienced the plight of the most disadvantaged groups in Singapore to have a say in public policy. Poorer scholars would possess a more intimate understanding of the needs of these individuals and how best to support them, ensuring that policies aimed at assisting the disenfranchised better hit their mark.

[195] Teng A, 'Study: Kids from Affluent Families More Likely in IP, GEP Schools' (The Straits Times, 2016) <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/study-kids-from-affluent-families-more-likely-in-ip-gep-schools> accessed 7 January 2026.

[196] Jean Iau, 'Public Service Leaders Must Have Courage to Advise Ministers Even When They Disagree: SM Teo' (The Straits Times, 28 March 2024) <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/public-service-leaders-must-have-the-courage-to-advise-ministers-even-when-they-disagree-sm-teo> accessed 15 November 2025.

Furthermore, scholars from low-income backgrounds would be able to perform a key advisory role within the civil service, ensuring that policymakers are cognisant of potential implications policies may have on underprivileged individuals. This is particularly important given rising public sentiment that the incumbent government has grown "out of touch"[197]. Welcoming more disadvantaged students into the civil service through scholarships would be a step in the correct direction: more means-tested scholarships would not only allow the government to more effectively render support to the people that need it the most, but also strengthen the trust of the public in the civil service and government as a whole.

IV. Preventing lost opportunities caused by scholars breaking their bond

Means-tested scholarships would also prevent a core issue almost exclusive to purely meritocratic scholarships: bond breaking. When a scholar decides to break their contractual bond of service to the government body that granted the scholarship, this is, on all accounts, a disastrous outcome. Not only does the civil service lose the budding talent it sought to recruit, but the scholarship could have gone to someone else who truly needed it. Indeed, bond breaking goes beyond the loss of one potential civil servant; it also represents an injustice towards individuals who would have seized the opportunity to study overseas and contribute to the civil service.

This injustice is further exacerbated by the aforementioned difficulties underprivileged students face in the scholarship application process. As it currently stands, these students, who are already engaged in an unfair competition against individuals with more resources at hand than them, could be denied a scholarship in favour of someone who treats their scholarship as nothing more than a back-up option to a private sector career. Implementing more means-tested scholarships would alleviate this injustice as low-income students would not be able to readily break their bond.

It may be contended that only a small proportion of scholars end up breaking their bond. This is what Lee Hsien Loong, who was then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM), advanced in Parliament.[198] However, this argument is untenable for two reasons. Firstly, it could be argued that any bond-breaking at all is unacceptable—as set out above, it is unjust and unfair to those denied a scholarship. Public support for this notion is obvious: the fact that concerns of bond-breaking was brought up in Parliament as recently as 4 February 2025[199] indicates that it is still a prominent problem today. Secondly, the conditions for bond breaking are more favourable than ever, driving up the likelihood of the phenomenon. In his speech, DPM Lee acknowledged that the bond breaking rate rises when public

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[197] The Online Citizen, '"Out of Touch": Pap MP Cassandra Lee Faces Criticism over "Best Time to Raise a Family" Remarks - the Online Citizen' (*The Online Citizen*, 2025) <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/09/26/out-of-touch-pap-mp-cassandra-lee-faces-criticism-over-best-time-to-raise-a-family-remarks/> accessed 15 November 2025 .

[198] Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report (25 August 2000) vol 72 (Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister).

[199] Workers' Party, 'Written Answers to Parliamentary Questions (4 February 2025)' (*The Workers' Party*, 2025) <https://www.wp.sg/parliament/written-answers-to-parliamentary-questions-4-february-2025> accessed 15 November 2025.

service salaries "get out of line with the private sector".[200] As time has progressed, the number of high-paying private sector jobs has steadily climbed, with qualified commercial lawyers, investment bankers, consultants and quants all making well over six digit pay. With the civil service simply unable to compete with these salaries, it is clear that public and private sector salaries are more out of line than ever. Thus, the conditions for bond-breaking are more favourable than ever, making it crucial that more means-tested scholarships are introduced to recruit fresh blood for the civil service, and ensure that students who will not break their bond are able to earn the scholarship.

V. The fallacy of recruiting the 'best and brightest'

Lee Kuan Yew's desire to recruit the 'best and brightest'[201] into the civil service has formed the foundation of Singapore's existing scholarship system, which is purely meritocratic in nature to achieve this result. However, while it is undeniably important to have competent individuals in the civil service, is it truly necessary to recruit the 'best and brightest' into government? This notion will be challenged on two fronts.

A. Talented individuals can contribute to Singapore outside of the civil service

While capable individuals are needed for the machinery of the civil service to operate smoothly, it is submitted that it is equally important to have capable individuals within the private sector as well. Having a thriving private sector driven by the best talent in the country is crucial for putting Singapore on the map, which yields both economic and political benefits. For instance, the efforts of capable lawyers such as Cavinder Bull SC have helped to establish Singapore as the second most preferred location for international arbitration globally, as seen by the 2025 International Arbitration Survey.[202] Such recognition creates demand for high-value legal services in Singapore, while also providing business and repute to institutions like the Singapore International Arbitration Centre. Similarly, home-grown companies like Grab have stimulated the creation of jobs for citizens, driving Singapore's economy forward. Visibly, the civil service should not monopolise Singapore's best and brightest; instead, some of these individuals should have the freedom to augment the private sector as well.

B. Other methods to recruit talent to the civil service

In an effort to attract the best and brightest, overwhelming significance has been placed on recruitment as the primary goal of government scholarships. However, this line of thinking is

[200] Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report (25 August 2000) vol 72 (Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister).
[201] Lawrence J. Lau, 'Lee Kuan Yew, a Man of the Century' (2015) <https://www.igef.cuhk.edu.hk/igef_media/working-paper/IGEF/igef%20working%20paper%20no.%2036%20english%20version.pdf> accessed 15 November 2025.
[202] White & Case and Queen Mary School of International Arbitration, '2025 International Arbitration Survey' (White & Case, 2025) <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/arbitration/research/2025-international-arbitration-survey/> accessed 7 January 2026.

fundamentally flawed. Offering scholarships is far from the only way to secure talent for the civil service. The government could turn to a whole host of other recruitment methods, from outreach advocating the impact of the civil service to bettering the working environment within the civil service to make working there attractive.

Indeed, if the only way the civil service is able to recruit talented individuals is by chaining them down with a scholarship, this indicates systemic problems within the civil service that ought to be rectified, rather than a reason to cling to scholarships as the primary way to recruit talent. Given the presence of these alternative methods of recruitment, scholarships should instead focus on an equally important goal: supporting underprivileged talent who cannot afford an overseas education. This goal, conversely, cannot fall to the wayside. As argued above, the government is one of the only institutions who can help this goal come to fruition. Consequently, it is evident that the government should make recruitment an ancillary goal whilst focusing on supporting the underprivileged, something best achieved through a means-tested scholarship.

Therefore, it is not immediately obvious that recruiting the best and the brightest should remain the central goal of government scholarships, and it certainly should not be the only goal. With one of the main justifications for preferring a purely meritocratic scholarship to a means-tested framework eliminated, it is clear that the latter should prevail.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing more means-tested scholarships should be the path forward for the government. As set out above, only having purely meritocratic scholarships is unfair for the underprivileged at best and can even be actively detrimental to the effectiveness of government by narrowing diversity of thought. Most significantly, the lack of viable alternatives to assist talented individuals who cannot pay for an overseas education cannot be ignored. Without more means-tested scholarships, underprivileged yet talented individuals may never receive the resources they need to reach their full potential, and their budding talent is doomed to never fully flourish. Failing to support these individuals would truly be a tragedy for the future of Singapore.

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The Evolution of Singapore's Social Compact: Beyond the Forward SG Agenda

Jia Xuan Tan

Introduction

In October 2023, the Singapore Government launched the *Forward Singapore* (Forward SG) report, describing it as a "roadmap" for Singapore's future and a vehicle to "refresh our social compact".[1] Over a 16-month exercise, more than 200,000 Singaporeans were engaged through some 275 partnerships and engagement sessions.[2] It was framed not as a technocratic policy review, but a whole-of-society effort to rethink how the state, market and community should share risks and responsibilities in a more uncertain world.[3]

Yet the language of a "social compact" is not new. A decade earlier, Manu Bhaskaran and Donald Low had already argued that rising inequality and new social risks required "a major rethink" of Singapore's economic and social policies, and "a new social compact".[4] Likewise, sociologists such as Chua Beng Huat and political scientists like Kenneth Paul Tan have traced how Singapore's post-independence social compact was built around a developmental, communitarian bargain: strong state leadership and constrained politics in exchange for rapid growth, stability and material improvement.[5]

This article thus examines Forward SG not as a standalone initiative, but the latest iteration in an evolving social compact. It argues that Forward SG signals a meaningful, albeit cautious, shift from a model centred on state provision towards one foregrounding shared responsibility and co-creation, most visibly in social welfare, employment and housing. At the same time, it operates within established governance norms of strong executive leadership, tripartism, and a cautious approach toward rights-based claims. Official discourse has consistently cautioned against framing social support as unconditional entitlements, with senior political leaders warning that a rights-based welfare approach could undermine self-reliance and fiscal sustainability.[6] Whether it can truly strengthen social resilience in the face of widening socioeconomic diversity and plural expectations ultimately depends on how deeply participatory practices are institutionalised beyond the life of this exercise, and the extent to which the state is willing to accommodate contestation and alternative viewpoints

From Developmental State to 'Shared Responsibility'

A social compact can be understood as a shared understanding between different groups in society in relation to one another, of their respective roles, responsibilities and entitlements. Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has described it in almost exactly these terms when explaining why Forward SG was necessary.[7] Such groups include the individual, family, community and government.[8]

In Singapore's formative years, this compact was largely developmental and communitarian.[9] Chua argues that this has historically legitimised a strong, paternalist state in exchange for growth, stability and upward mobility.[10]

By the late 2000s, however, this compact was under pressure. Real wage stagnation among low-income workers, volatile globalisation and housing anxieties sharpened distributional tensions.[11] Bhaskaran, Low and their co-authors warned that an over-reliance on market mechanisms and individual self-reliance was no longer adequate in a more unequal society, calling for more robust social insurance and redistribution.[12] Irene Ng's work on 'rediscovering poverty' likewise showed that pockets of persistent deprivation had been obscured by aggregate prosperity, and that the existing safety net left many low-wage households vulnerable.[13]

Politically, the 2011 and 2015 General Elections also signalled citizens' growing expectations of voice, accountability and fairness. Post-election surveys by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) show rising expectations for greater participation and responsiveness, particularly among younger and middle-income Singaporeans.[14] In response, the state did not abandon its developmental model, but began to speak more explicitly of partnership and collaboration. For instance, the *Singapore Together* movement launched in 2019 was framed as a "shift in governance approach towards deeper partnership between the Government and Singaporeans", with initiatives to "co-create and co-implement" policies and programmes.[15] Forward SG builds on this trajectory, promising a "big government-big society nexus" of shared governance.[16]

The key question, however, is whether this rhetoric of 'shared responsibility' represents a genuine rebalancing of power and obligation, or primarily a way of sustaining existing governance norms under new socioeconomic conditions.

Forward SG as Process and Symbol

Forward SG is significant in both process and symbolism. As a process, it involved multiple channels of engagement.[17] Housing affordability, job security, and support for families and seniors emerged as recurring concerns in public engagements and media coverage of the exercise.[18]

Symbolically, Forward SG articulates a renewed social compact centred on assurance, employability and housing affordability.[19] The exercise also explicitly links Singapore's domestic social compact to global anxieties about fraying solidarities elsewhere. The Strategy Group in the Prime Minister's Office has warned that other countries have seen social compacts 'fray' as citizens feel excluded from progress, a trajectory Singapore seeks to avoid through Forward SG.[20]

Forward SG therefore extends beyond a series of discrete policy adjustments. It also represents an effort to articulate a new phase of governance, in which the state remains strong but seeks legitimacy through more visible collaboration and responsiveness.

1. Social Welfare and the Ethics of Assurance

Social policy is one arena where this shift is most visible. Historically, Singapore's welfare regime has been characterised as 'productivist' or 'developmental': social assistance is tightly targeted, means-tested and oriented towards maintaining work incentives, rather than articulated as a universal right.[21] Ng's seminal article on "Social Welfare in Singapore: Rediscovering Poverty, Reshaping Policy" argues that despite recent expansions, social policy has continued to be constrained by discourses of self-reliance, meritocracy and anti-welfarism.[22] Her later work shows that while most Singaporeans support greater assistance for the poor, they are ambivalent about paying higher taxes to fund it.[23] This coexistence of distributive support and tax aversion narrows the political space for ambitious, universal welfare reform, encouraging policymakers to pursue incremental expansions of targeted schemes instead.

Forward SG seeks to recalibrate this balance between state support and individual responsibility without abandoning the emphasis on individual effort. In the 'Care' pillar, the report commits to more generous and automatic baseline support for vulnerable groups, through enhancements to existing schemes and closer coordination with community partners.[24]

Crucially, Forward SG also highlights the role of community networks and civic groups in delivering assurance. The IPS Exchange Series *Mobilising Diverse Community Assets to Meet Social Needs* documents

how local initiatives, from social service agencies to arts-based projects, have increasingly been enlisted as partners in addressing complex social issues.[25] Ijlal Naqvi's chapter explicitly characterises such community engagement as a form of 'participatory governance', where citizens are invited not only to receive services but also to co-define problems and co-produce solutions.[26]

The Forward SG narrative aligns itself with this participatory ethos. However, the extent to which community groups are able to exercise genuine autonomy, rather than operate as adjuncts to a state-defined agenda, remains an open question. As scholars such as Terence Lee have observed, voluntary organisations in Singapore often cultivate 'vertical' relationships with the state for resources and legitimacy, at the expense of 'horizontal' networks that might support more independent advocacy.[27]

In that sense, Forward SG promises a more relational, networked welfare ecosystem, but the underlying power asymmetries between state and community remain to be resolved.

2. Work, Wages and Tripartite Co-Creation

Employment policy is another key arena where the social compact is being renegotiated. Singapore has eschewed a universal minimum wage in favour of the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), a sector- and occupation-specific wage ladder developed by tripartite committees comprising unions, employers and the Government.[28] It aims to uplift resident lower-wage workers by tying wage floors to skills upgrading and productivity improvements, supported by government co-funding of wage increases through the Progressive Wage Credit Scheme (PWCS).[29]

From the Government's perspective, this represents a paradigmatic example of 'shared responsibility': employers commit to paying higher wages and redesigning jobs, workers commit to upgrading skills, and the state subsidises the transition costs.[30] The Workfare Income Supplement (Workfare) supplements this by topping up incomes and CPF savings, while Workfare Skills Support nudges lower-wage workers into training.[31]

Forward SG explicitly builds on this model, promising further expansions of PWM coverage and enhanced support for mid-career transitions, as part of a broader agenda of 'lifelong employability'.[32] In doing so, it draws on Singapore's longstanding tripartite tradition, a core institutional asset for sustaining inclusive growth by allowing distributive adjustments to be negotiated within cooperative, executive-led forums.[33]

Critical scholars, however, have questioned whether such arrangements are sufficient to tackle deeper structural inequality. Low argues that while targeted schemes like Workfare and PWM are helpful, a more comprehensive social security architecture, including some form of wage or income floor and more progressive taxation, may be required to address what he terms the 'inequality trap'.[34]

Within this debate, Forward SG can be read as consolidating an incrementalist path: wages and protections at the bottom are being gradually raised through tripartite negotiation, but within parameters that preserve labour market flexibility and a relatively low-tax regime. The public conversation around work and wages is widened through citizen engagements, although conversations about the broader distributional model remain more modest in scope.

3. Housing, Fairness and the Politics of Home

Public housing has long been the material core of Singapore's social compact. Over 80% of residents live in Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats, with about 90% of these households owning their homes.[35] The implicit bargain has been that hard work and thrift, combined with state support for homeownership, would secure a stake in the nation.

However, in recent years, concerns about housing affordability, especially for younger Singaporeans, have moved to the forefront of public debate. At early Forward SG engagement sessions on housing, participants raised concerns such as difficulty securing Build-To-Order (BTO) flats, perceived unfairness between first-time and second-time buyers, and anxieties over resale prices.[36]

In August 2023, alongside the Forward SG process, the Government announced a major overhaul of the BTO classification framework.[37] The change is justified in terms of fairness across generations and income groups, and in preserving the relative affordability of centrally located flats.[38]

On one level, this reflects a renewed willingness to intervene more assertively in housing markets to preserve the social compact. On another, it highlights the Government's continuing central role in determining how fairness is interpreted and operationalised. While these changes were informed by public sentiment gathered through Forward SG and earlier Long-Term Plan consultations,[39] the ultimate policy design emerged from within the executive; greater transparency about how citizen input is weighed could further strengthen public trust.[40]

Tan argues that Singapore's governance system has historically combined responsiveness with a determination to "maintain its hegemony while securing a pre-eminent position in the global economic order".[41] The Plus-Prime framework exemplifies this duality. It addresses immediate anxieties over access and runaway prices, yet remains firmly anchored within an ownership-based, asset-building paradigm. Whether such incremental adjustment proves sufficient depends on longer-term trends in generational wealth gaps and housing price dynamics. If affordability pressures persist or perceptions of stratification deepen, more fundamental reconsideration may become necessary to sustain the moral legitimacy of the housing compact.

Participatory Governance: Beyond Consultation?

Beyond legitimacy, deeper participation can surface lived experiences that technocratic models often miss. To what extent, then, does Forward SG mark a deeper shift towards participatory governance?

On paper, it forms part of a broader constellation of initiatives – Singapore Together, the Alliances for Action (AfAs), and citizen panels on issues ranging from recycling to neighbourhood noise – embodying what public service commentators have described as a transition from a 'closed-model' to an 'open-model' of governance.[42] The establishment of the Singapore Partnerships Office within the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth represents an attempt to institutionalise these efforts by coordinating partnerships with citizens, communities and businesses.[43]

Academic analyses of such engagement efforts, however, are more cautious. Naqvi notes that community engagement can function as participatory governance when citizens are meaningfully involved in problem definition and agenda-setting, but warns that in highly centralised contexts it can be reduced to "managed participation" aimed at legitimising pre-determined policies.[44] Similarly, Lee and Mathews highlight both the potential and the limits of co-creation in Singapore's social service landscape. While partnerships can mobilise local knowledge and foster trust, they often take place within tight regulatory frameworks and funding regimes that privilege state-defined objectives and eligibility criteria, thereby constraining experimentation with alternative programme designs and forms of grassroots-led problem definition.[45]

Brief comparison helps situate Singapore's approach. In South Korea, deliberative forums have expanded citizen input, but remain politically contingent. Agenda-setting is typically executive-led, and participatory institutions are vulnerable to policy reversals amid party alternation.[46] By contrast, Nordic

corporatist systems embed participation more structurally through institutionalised tripartite bargaining, supported by strong unions, autonomous civil society organisations and higher taxation.[47] Singapore's model differs from both. Unlike South Korea, participation is not episodic or politically unstable, but administratively institutionalised within a stable executive framework. Yet unlike Nordic systems, this institutionalisation does not entail significant redistribution of agenda-setting authority or bargaining power. Participation is embedded procedurally rather than structurally, operating within (rather than reshaping) a highly centralised executive state.

Chua's more recent reflections on "non-liberal communitarian democracy" offer an interesting perspective. He contends that while Singapore now relies more heavily on mechanisms such as elections and feedback channels to gauge consent, the underlying political compact continues to emphasise communitarian values and a strong coordinating role for the state. The state is responsive and consultative, yet retains the responsibility to determine when broader public interests may require particular policy decisions.[48]

Viewed through this lens, Forward SG appears as a significant, but still bounded, experiment in participatory governance. Citizens are invited to share experiences, debate trade-offs and propose ideas across a wide range of issues. Some of these suggestions have clearly shaped public practice. For instance, the Singapore Government Partnerships Office was established in 2024 in direct response to aspirations voiced by participants in the Forward SG exercise for deeper collaboration and co-creation in policy implementation.[49]

However, key decisions about distributional norms – how much more to tax and spend, the balance between wage regulation and labour market flexibility – remain tightly held within the executive and technocratic elite. This is not necessarily dysfunctional. Concentrating such decisions within the state has historically underpinned Singapore's capacity for fiscal discipline, policy coherence and rapid adjustment in a volatile global economy. At the same time, it reinforces a broader pattern of incrementalism, where participatory mechanisms inform the fine-tuning of policy instruments instead of renegotiating underlying distributive principles. Participatory governance thus expands the range of voices consulted, but it operates alongside, rather than displaces, established modes of top-down policymaking.

Social Resilience in a More Diverse Society

Despite these limits, Forward SG's emphasis on shared responsibility and collaboration can contribute meaningfully to social resilience, particularly by strengthening trust in institutions and normalising dialogue over contested social issues. Social resilience here refers not only to economic buffers, but also to the strength of social ties, institutional trust, and the capacity to manage pluralism peacefully. Mathews' work on race relations and social cohesion underscores the importance of "everyday networks", such as friendships and associations across ethnic and class lines, in sustaining Singapore's multicultural compact.[50]

However, this contribution is conditional rather than automatic. It hinges on whether participatory practices are sustained beyond one-off exercises, whether collaboration fosters horizontal networks among citizens rather than primarily vertical engagement with the state, and whether disagreement and alternative policy visions are treated as legitimate components of collaboration rather than risks to be managed.

What would a more resilient social compact require?

1. **Deepening institutional guarantees for participation**

This could include clearer principles on when and how citizen panels are convened, greater transparency about how public input shapes decisions, and more systematic support for independent civic research and advocacy.

2. **Broadening the redistributive toolkit**

IPS and IPS-OnePeople.sg studies have highlighted latent anxieties about inequality, immigration and cultural difference, particularly among younger Singaporeans.[51] Building on the groundwork laid by PWM, Workfare and enhanced social schemes, policymakers may need to consider more progressive taxation and more universal forms of social protection if inequality and insecurity continue to rise.

Forward SG's language of a refreshed social compact could help address this. By recognising that vulnerabilities can arise across the life course from youths anxious about job prospects to low-income seniors, it moves away from a binary divide between the 'deserving poor' and 'self-reliant majority'.[52] Its call for "all who are able" to contribute whether through taxes, volunteering or neighbourly care also attempts to extend responsibility upwards to the more affluent, albeit in soft rather than rights-based terms.[53] Its effectiveness thus lies less in immediate redistribution than in its capacity to

normalise upward contribution as a legitimate expectation, thereby lowering political resistance to future policy adjustments.

3. **Embracing plural narratives of the good society**

As Tan notes, sustaining hegemony in a more complex, globalised city-state requires not only delivering material goods but also accommodating diverse values, aspirations and narratives of what constitutes a good society.[54] This includes giving greater space for alternative policy ideas to be debated without being framed as threats to stability. Our civil society is thus not merely a channel for policy feedback, but an independent site where visions can be articulated.

Conclusion

As Singapore marks its 61st year of independence, Forward SG represents both continuity and change in the evolution of its social compact. Ultimately, Forward SG should be seen less as a single policy blueprint than as an experiment in re-imagining how the state relates to its citizens. If Singapore is prepared to let participatory governance reshape not just programmes but also distributive norms, Forward SG may yet mark a substantive turning point in the evolution of its social compact.

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22. Ng (n 10).

23. Ibid; see also Irene YH Ng and others, *A Handbook on Inequality, Poverty and Unmet Social Needs in Singapore* (Social Space/NCSS 2017).

24. Government of Singapore, *Forward Singapore* (n 1) ch 3; Ministry of Social and Family Development, 'Forward SG: Care Pillar Engagements' (brochure, 2023) <https://www.msf.gov.sg/docs/default-source/research-data-document/msf-forward-sg-brochure.pdf> accessed 14 November 2025.

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32. Government of Singapore, *Forward Singapore* (n 1) ch 2.

33. For an overview see Tan (n 4) ch 3; and various essays in Donald Low (ed), *Hard Choices* (n 8).

34. Low and Vadaketh (n 8); Donald Low, 'Hard Choices in Singapore's New Normal' (LKYSPP Global-is-Asian, 2014).

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40. Government of Singapore, *Forward Singapore* (n 1) ch 4; Lee (n 33).

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44. Naqvi (n 23).

45. Lee, Mathews and Tan (eds) (n 22).

46. John S Dryzek and Sora Kim, 'Deliberative Capacity and Democratic Resilience: South Korea's Experience with Deliberative Democracy' (2021) 47 Policy and Society 30.

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51. Ibid; see also IPS Social Lab, 'IPS–OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony 2025' (summary tracker, 2025).

52. Government of Singapore, *Forward Singapore* (n 1) chs 3–4.

53. Ibid ch 1.

54. Tan (n 37).

Nuclear Bonds and the Children Trapped Between

Tay Zhe Qian

Introduction

Singapore's 15th Parliament convened in September 2025 with a renewed emphasis on social mobility. During the opening session, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong highlighted the government's efforts to strengthen social safety nets, particularly mentioning programmes aimed at addressing childhood and educational inequalities, such as KidStart.[203] Indeed, the government has been increasingly perceptive in tackling inequality, as demonstrated by the current Parliament.[204] According to the *UBS Wealth Report 2024*, the average wealth per adult in Singapore, measured by the mean, increased by more than 116% in SGD terms since 2008, while the median wealth per adult declined by 2% over the same period. This divergence in mean and median indicates that wealth has become more concentrated at higher income levels, reflecting Singapore's rising Gini coefficient, which increased by 22.9% between 2008 and 2023.[205] **Challenges Faced by "Illegitimate" Children**

Despite renewed efforts to address inequality, one notable demographic absent from the current parliamentary debate is children born outside marriage, referred to as "illegitimate" children under the colonial-era Legitimacy Act 1934. The act restricts inheritance rights for "illegitimate" children, setting a precedent for exclusion through statutory laws in the distribution of social welfare.[206] "Illegitimate" children face significant social challenges, further worsened by financial difficulties within their families. The average mother of an "illegitimate" child earns about S$600 per month, according to

[203] AH Min, 'Singapore Government Aims to Keep Social Mobility Alive, Strengthen Safety Nets and Deepen Solidarity: PM Wong' Channel NewsAsia (25 September 2025) https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/we-first-society-lawrence-wong-social-mobility-safety-nets5366126 accessed 14 November 2025.
[204] Ibid.
[205] TN Lun, 'Singapore Average Wealth Continues Uptrend as Inequality Surpasses Several Regional Peers: UBS Report' The Business Times (10 July 2024) <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/companies-markets/singapore-average-wealth-continues-uptrend-inequality-surpasses-several-regional-peers-ubs-report> accessed 14 November 2025.
[206] Legitimacy Act 1934 (Singapore) <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/LA1934> accessed 14 November 2025.

Parliament.[207] The Economic Development Board states that a room in a government flat located "Outside Central Region" starts at around S$500 per month.[208] This supports the view of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) that most mothers of "illegitimate" children are "likely to need subsidies".[209]

Given the evident tyranny of financial mathematics and the supposedly "sinless" nature of children, it could reasonably be expected that "illegitimate" children would receive substantial social support from the government, perhaps even more than nuclear families. However, this expectation is not currently fulfilled. Housing serves as a poignant and powerful reminder. Single parents with "illegitimate" children do not form the core family unit required for housing grants under HDB rules, which worsens financial difficulties caused by incomes below the cost-of-living average.[210] Such parents are also often denied access to HDB rental flats. Between 2014 and 2019, more than 60% of rental flat applications made by mothers of "illegitimate" children were rejected.[211] This gap in access to housing epitomises a systemic oversight in social welfare provision; safe, quality, and stable homes reduce vulnerability to poverty, boost health, and improve access to employment.[212] The insufficient support for "illegitimate" children exposes a potential policy conflict: the 15th Parliament intends to address social inequality, yet current regulations towards "illegitimate" children, perhaps inadvertently, exacerbate inequality.[213]

A Policy History of Gradual Reform

The government recognises the unique challenges faced by single unwed mothers and has introduced reforms to address them. In 2013, the government extended childcare and infant care leave to single

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[207] S Hingorani, 'Commentary: The Road to Housing for Single, Unwed Mothers Is Clearer but Still Bumpy' Channel NewsAsia (31 March 2021) <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/single-unwed-mother-hdb-mnd-policy-child-family-support-subsidy-770016> accessed 14 November 2025.
[208] Economic Development Board Singapore, 'Cost of Living Calculator' <https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/setting-up-in-singapore/cost-of-living-calculator.html> accessed 14 November 2025.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Housing & Development Board, 'Couples and Families' <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/buying-a-flat/understanding-your-eligibility-and-housing-loan-options/flat-and-grant-eligibility/couples-and-families> accessed 14 November 2025.
[211] Ibid.
[212] M Gibson and others, 'Housing and Health Inequalities: A Synthesis of Systematic Reviews of Interventions Aimed at Different Pathways Linking Housing and Health' (2010) 17(1) Health & Place 175 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2010.09.011>.
[213] Ibid.

unwed parents. In 2016, CDA benefits were extended to Singaporean children of single unwed parents. In 2017, single unwed mothers gained the right to 16 weeks of government-funded maternity leave.[214] Notably, single unwed parents have been allowed to buy some HDB flats from 2020.[215]

These improvements in social support are likely to be welcomed by beneficiaries. However, the effectiveness of these reforms might not be enough to significantly reduce social inequality. Extending childcare, infant, and maternity leave to single unwed mothers is well-intentioned but may have limited impact. Specific MSF data on the employment types of single, unwed parents are unavailable or not publicly accessible, but a parliamentary reply provided by MSF states that "for those aged below 35 years old, it is likely that quite a number may be working in part-time jobs or only for a few months of the year".[216] The prevalence of part-time or irregular labour among younger, single, unwed parents diminishes the usefulness of government-mandated or funded leave, as leave usually requires stable employment.

Similar issues affect other reforms. The extension of CDA eligibility to single unwed parents provides a S$5,000 First Step Grant and government co-matching of up to S$4,000 for parental contributions into the CDA, offering aid of up to S$9,000 for a first child.[217] Support from the First Step Grant is certainly welcome, but problems remain. Single unwed parents still cannot access the Baby Bonus, and it is questionable how effective dollar matching would be for young mothers of "illegitimate" children, given their limited capacity to save.

Recent reforms, therefore, are a step in the right direction but remain insufficient to provide systemic social support to the affected children. The changes may serve as a symbolic effort to address potential social stigma faced by "illegitimate" children. However, they do not currently do enough to provide material social support for children and their single unwed parents.

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[214] M Ng, 'Annual Births for Single Unwed Mothers Trending Down Since 2013: Sun Xueling' The Straits Times (3 August 2021) <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/annual-births-to-single-unwed-mothers-trending-down-since-2013-sun-xueling> accessed 14 November 2025.

[215] M Ng, 'Parliament: HDB to Scrap Re-Offer of Balance Flat Exercises; Single Unwed Parents Can Buy New 3-Room Flats in Non-Mature Estates' The Straits Times (3 August 2021) <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-hdb-to-scrap-re-offer-of-balance-flat-exercises-unwed-parents-can-buy-new-3-room> accessed 14 November 2025.

[216] Ministry of Social and Family Development, 'Average Income of Single Unwed Parents' (19 November 2018) <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/Average-income-of-single-unwed-parents> accessed 14 November 2025.

[217] LifeSG, 'Baby Bonus Scheme' <https://www.life.gov.sg/family-parenting/benefits-support/baby-bonus-scheme> accessed 14 November 2025.

Impediments and the Way Forward

Singapore supports the prioritisation of the family unit as the nucleus of society.[218] As such, there may be concerns that loosening disincentives, or indeed, introducing incentives for parents to raise children outside of wedlock, may increase such undesired instances. There is, therefore, a plausible policy conflict between the upholding of desired social norms and state support for increased social equality.

In reality, the fear of introducing perverse incentives and moral hazards may be unfounded. Despite the gradual removal of restrictions on single unwed parents since 2013, the number of children born out of wedlock has fallen, averaging 830 per year between 2013 and 2020.[219] There is no evidence of a causal relationship between the introduction of increased social support for "illegitimate" children and the number of such children born annually.

What, therefore, might explain the government's cautious, gradual, and piecemeal approach? A convincing explanation could be public sentiment, which is likely to oppose increased support for single unwed parents. According to a 2024 survey titled *"Marriage, Family & Social Discourse"* conducted by Cultivate, a Singapore-based NGO, the Singaporean public overwhelmingly supports the primacy of the nuclear family. Nearly 8 in 10 Singaporeans agree that marriage benefits society. Likewise, more than 8 in 10 Singaporeans believe that children should be raised by a mother and a father.[220] Consequently, the government may be concerned about provoking cultural sensitivities or igniting divisive "culture wars".

On the other hand, Singaporeans also care deeply about the welfare of single parents and their children. According to another survey conducted by Rice Media, and the same survey by Cultivate, more than 8 in 10 Singaporeans think that the government "should do more to support single parents".[221,222] Taken together, these views present a more nuanced picture of public support for nuclear families. Singaporeans strongly support the preservation of the nuclear family, but there

[218] Ministry of Social and Family Development, 'Tax Rebates and Baby Bonuses to Single Parents' (6 July 2021) <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/Tax-Rebates-and-Baby-Bonuses-to-Single-Parents> accessed 14 November 2025.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Cultivate, 'Marriage, Family & Social Discourse Survey Report' (2024) <https://cultivate.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/20241115-MFSD-Survey-Report.pdf> accessed 14 November 2025.
[221] Ibid.
[222] A Lee, 'How Are Single Mothers Thinking about Their Votes This General Election?' RICE (3 July 2020) <https://www.ricemedia.co/current-affairs-ge-2020-single-mothers/> accessed 14 November 2025.

remains a strong public desire to ensure that parents and children who do fall outside of the nuclear family receive enough support to enjoy a reasonable standard of living.

Given that increased support for single unwed parents has not led to a rise in the incidence of "illegitimate" children, and there is strong backing for such measures, the way forward is evident: the government should continue to improve support for non-nuclear families, including single unwed parents, while persistently discouraging the formation of non-nuclear relationships. This represents a balancing act which appears straightforward on its face but is difficult in practice, necessitating an assessment of various proposals put forward by social welfare organisations.

Avenues for Reform and Political Legitimacy

AWARE has consistently advocated for "unwed parents and their children to be recognised as a family nucleus under housing policies". This change would enable single unwed parents to access HDB grants, ensuring that no child faces homelessness. The reforms are not intended to weaken the nuclear family but rather to reflect Singaporeans' "collective humanity" and should be fully prioritised.[223]

Similar measures proposed by AWARE, which could also be justified under the principle of collective humanity, include equalising support given to married and unmarried parents. This would, in practice, involve extending the Working Mother's Child Relief, Foreign Domestic Worker Levy Relief, and the Baby Bonus Cash Gift to single unwed parents.[224]

Overall, the extension of the Baby Bonus should be prioritised first, for policy and practical reasons. On the policy level, there is a precedent for providing direct aid to single unwed parents. The extension of the CDA First Step Grant to single unwed parents in 2016 did not provoke controversy. Moreover, the stated reason provided by MSF in 2021 for withholding the Baby Bonus was to "encourage parenthood within marriage"; yet, the CDA First Step Grant was supplied to single unwed parents.[225] The inconsistency in provisions for single unwed parents merits policy rationalisation and alignment.

Practically, the Baby Bonus Cash Gift provides the most support to the lowest income group of single, unwed mothers – those under 35. According to Singapore tax law, annual incomes below S$20,000

[223] YM Lee, 'Forum Letter: Address the Discrimination against Single Unwed Mums First' AWARE (26 August 2024) <https://www.aware.org.sg/2024/08/forum-letter-discrimination-single-unwed-mums/> accessed 14 November 2025.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid.

are exempt from tax.[226] Given the median annual income of S$7,200 for this vulnerable group, tax relief will be immaterial due to the lack of tax liability.[227] Thus, extending tax relief to unwed parents may not generate sufficient returns on investment from a political or administrative capital expenditure perspective.

As a harsh consequence of the need to balance compassion for "illegitimate" children and the protection of the nuclear family, in alignment with public sentiment, some suggestions might not currently be seen as politically legitimate by voters. In 2022, then-MP Mr Louis Ng proposed establishing a "low-cost ad hoc nanny service" for single parents.[228] Although the effectiveness of such an initiative cannot be questioned, a service like this might struggle to gain support in the court of public opinion. The extension of exclusive programmes solely for single unwed parents could raise fairness concerns or transmit unintended policy signals, leading to public perceptions that the government may be favouring non-nuclear families over nuclear families. This might appear to undermine the relative position of the latter in the eyes of the public.

Proposed Sequencing and Evaluation of Policy History

Measures aimed at supporting single unwed parents should be based on principles of equality and compassion, and must not create the impression that non-nuclear families are being favoured. Ideally, increased support for single parents should not, in the short-term, be equivalent in its scope to support for nuclear families. Benefits enjoyed by nuclear families, such as the Baby Bonus, should be expanded quickly, while less material social equality measures, such as tax relief, should be withheld, symbolising the government's endorsement of the primacy of nuclear families in society. Additional measures to support single unwed parents should also be extended to nuclear families, providing help to the most vulnerable, whilst maintaining the publicly endorsed position on the importance of the nuclear family. By adhering to these principles, the government can successfully navigate conflicting public demands, resolving the policy tension between social equality, a collective-centred society, and public support for nuclear families.

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[226] Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, 'Calculators' <https://www.iras.gov.sg/quick-links/calculators> accessed 14 November 2025.
[227] Ibid.
[228] M Menon, 'Budget Debate: MPs Call for Better Support for Single Parents, Low-Income Families' The Straits Times (9 March 2022) <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/budget-debate-mps-call-for-better-support-for-single-parents-low-income-families> accessed 14 November 2025.

The government's policy history reflects a prudent, incrementalist model of policy reform, as advanced by Charles Lindblom, In such a model, policies are made through pluralistic mutual adjustment, leading to the incremental adoption of proposals that differ from the status quo, which ultimately contributes to significant change.[229] This article highlights a trend of a slow but steadily increasing Gini coefficient of about 1.5% annually between 2008 and 2023; a problematic issue that nevertheless does not require the non-incremental response taken in response to significant crises.[230,231]

Consequently, the article accepts that deliberate non-equalisation must be a short-term political reality as a stepping stone towards complete political and legal support for single unwed parents. The article's contention with the government's policy history, therefore, exists in the historical sequencing of incremental policy action even as it supports the government's overall approach. Specifically, it advocates prioritising policy actions that would most effectively counteract Singapore's steady rise in its Gini coefficient, such as HDB eligibility and the Baby Bonus Scheme.

In the long-term, this article argues that equalisation will shift the Overton window, which is the range of ideas a society considers politically acceptable at a given time, enabling targeted aid for single unwed parents. Such shifts have historically occurred over decades, moving public acceptance towards specific ideas over generations. Indeed, such a shift has been demonstrated in the social policy space, especially redistributive financial policy, from the 1990s to the present day.

In the 1990s, Singapore's social policy viewed economic growth as the state's primary objective. Government redistributive welfare was limited. When present, such policies were designed to be temporary and instead focused on enabling the recipient to "find ways to help himself". Redistributive policy was guided by a "Many Helping Hands" principle, apportioning responsibility for general social welfare between the state and other organisations such as voluntary groups, corporate citizens, and religious organisations.[232]

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[229] M Hayes, 'Incrementalism and Public Policy-Making' in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.133>.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid.
[232] ES Tay, 'Speech by Dr Tay Eng Soon, Senior Minister of State (Education), at the Conference on "Social Services: The Next Lap" at the National Productivity Board Auditorium (21 June 1991)' National Archives of Singapore <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/732ba6e8-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad> accessed 1 January 2026.

Over the next two decades, as the then-government fervently pursued GDP growth, many Singaporeans failed to be buoyed by the rising tide of economic growth. In 2010, for example, GDP grew by 14.5%, while real median household income increased by 0.3%.[233] Consequently, public appetite for increased state policy intervention rose significantly, evidenced by the swift launch of the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) in 2014, which introduced sector-specific minimum wages.[234] This trend from collective, temporary, "self-help" redistributive policy in the 1990s towards a stronger welfare state continues to the present day, with the normalisation of broad cost-of-living voucher disbursements from 2022.[235,236]

As demonstrated by the significant shift in societal attitudes and government policy towards social redistributive policy, incrementalism can create massive shifts in the Overton window over long periods of time. The government's increasingly equal treatment of single unwed parents portends the emergence of social appetites that favour equal support for all parents and specialised support for parents in exceptional need, such as single unwed parents.

Conclusion

Children of single unwed parents occupy a complex policy space, simultaneously innocent victims of structural neglect and symbolic reminders of social arrangements that diverge from Singapore's idealised family model. While the state has made notable progress in widening eligibility for certain schemes, existing reforms fall short of addressing core inequalities.

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[233] K Lim and W Sim, 'Factbox – Main Issues in Singapore's 2011 General Election' Reuters (6 May 2011) <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/factbox-main-issues-in-singapores-2011-general-election-idUSTRE74513L/> accessed 14 November 2025.

[234] S Rashid, 'Progressive Wage Model: Over a Decade of Raising Incomes and Reshaping Work' Centre for Domestic Employees (3 July 2025) <https://www.cde.org.sg/news/Progressive-Wage-Model-Over-a-decade-of-raising-incomes-and-reshaping-work> accessed 14 November 2025.

[235] Ministry of Finance, 'Budget 2022: Charting Our New Way Forward Together' (18 February 2022) <https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-resources/newsroom/budget-2022-charting-our-new-way-forward-together/> accessed 14 November 2025.

[236] Ministry of Finance, 'Celebrating SG60' (2025) <https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget-2025-highlights/celebrating-sg60> accessed 14 November 2025.

Nevertheless, support for more inclusive measures remains strong. Singaporeans are overwhelmingly committed to maintaining the traditional nuclear family, but they also back the needs of members in non-traditional family arrangements. A carefully balanced approach that extends core benefits, such as the Baby Bonus, while upholding the symbolic importance of marriage, offers the most sustainable way forward. This would demonstrate compassionate pragmatism, aiding vulnerable "illegitimate" children without undermining shared social values. Over time, policy equalisation will widen the Overton window, allowing specialised support. Singapore's family policy can, and should, serve both society and social equality.

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