

## Singapore: Can autocracies work?

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### Abstract

*Autocracies are commonly used as examples of a country's decline into a failed state. Conventional logic has led us to believe that autocracies go hand in hand with failed states. Even China, an economically successful autocracy, is hindered by its government's high degree of human rights abuse and its citizens' lack of personal freedoms. Singapore however presents a unique case, the country is economically successful despite no natural resources and politically successful despite being an autocracy. Many other southeast Asian nations are in a similar situation but are plagued by civil unrest. This study aims to investigate the relationship between society and government in Singapore by answering the question of how Singapore created a successful autocracy where many other southeast Asian nations have failed. My hypothesis for this study is that Singapore's economic success and quality of life have led its citizens to approve of their government despite autocracies traditionally seeing low government approval. In this study I will answer my questions by utilizing the Mill's Method. The four cases of Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore will be used to study the relationship between economic success and government approval. The results of this study have important implications for understanding the relationship between economic success and government approval in both southeast Asian and global autocracies.*

Autocratic governments have long been considered a defining feature of failed states, and for good reason. The top 10 countries on the Fragile State Index are all autocracies.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Singapore is an anomaly among autocracies, it boasts a GDP per capita over 8 times larger than the Southeast Asian country with the second largest GDP per capita, Thailand. The country remains

politically stable, maintaining the ruling party, the People's Action Party, for over 62 years with no organized movement to overthrow it. Singapore also has one of the lowest crime rates in the region, even going 179 days crime-free in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the country sounds like a modern paradise,

<sup>1</sup> "Fragile States Index - Global Data 2021"  
*Fragile States Index*, The Fund for Peace, 2021,  
<https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/>

<sup>2</sup> "Singapore 2020 Crime & Safety Report"  
*OSAC.gov*, Overseas Security Council, 6  
Apr. 2020,  
[www.osac.gov/Country/Singapore/Content/  
Detail/Report/7f0cc2bc-ba9b-4485-  
b58b-1861aa0f8fc3](http://www.osac.gov/Country/Singapore/Content/Detail/Report/7f0cc2bc-ba9b-4485-b58b-1861aa0f8fc3)

economically wealthy, stable and with low crime. Without knowing the name you would imagine this is describing a wealthy western democracy. But Singapore isn't that, in fact it's the opposite, it's a Southeast Asian authoritarian state with all the lacking civil liberties you would expect. The People's Action Party (PAP) enjoys practically uncontested rule over Singapore. Citizens of Singapore also experience limited civil liberties with free speech being a main concern.<sup>3</sup> Despite this the PAP still receives large support from Singaporeans and people seem generally happy with life in Singapore. So why is the country so economically successful, and why do the citizens accept life under an authoritarian state with minimal qualms? This study will look at the relationship between government and society across four different Southeast Asian countries and compare how their autocratic governments have failed compared to Singapore by asking the following questions:

- “What is the relationship between government and society in Singapore?”
- “Why does autocracy usually fail?”
- “What is needed for an autocracy to succeed?”
- “Why has autocracy in Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand failed?”
- “Why has autocracy in Singapore succeeded?”

*Table 1: Mill's Method Chart comparing the relationship between a strong economy and a strong government in countries across Southeast Asia.*

		Strong Economy <sup>1</sup>	
		Yes	No
Strong Government <sup>2</sup>	Yes	Singapore	Philippines
	No	Thailand	Myanmar

1. Countries with a GDP per capita >\$6,000(USD) (2019 World Bank Data)  
2. Countries with citizens approval of how democracy works in their country >80%. (Asian Barometer Data) AND countries with same government system >10 years.

The Mill's Method will be used to analyze my four cases, comparing their economies against the strength of their governments. Countries' economies will be judged based primarily on GDP per capita to get a better idea of the standard of living in the country. The strength of governments will be judged based on both the government approval of citizens as well as their political stability. The hypothesis of this study is that a country with strong economic growth will have a better relationship with its citizens. As a country becomes more economically successful and life for the average citizen improves, they become more willing to overlook the shortcomings of government and relinquish civil liberties. Through these cases I expect to find evidence that economic success has been the driving factor behind Singapore's success as an autocratic government and how the country has maintained a positive relationship with its citizens where its Southeast Asian counterparts have failed.

### Case Breakdown *Singapore*

Singapore currently has the 15th highest GDP per capita in the world and one

<sup>3</sup> “Freedom in the World 2020 - Singapore” *Freedom House*, FreedomHouse, 2020, [freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2020](https://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2020)

of the world's fastest growing economies.<sup>4</sup> Yet the country still suffers from the classic elements of autocracy. The People's Action Party (PAP) has remained in sole control of Singapore since its formation in 1954. The PAP strictly controls the media, elections, and even protests, which must be approved by the government.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in 2006 82% of Singaporeans said they were satisfied with the way democracy works in their country.<sup>6</sup> This isn't because Singaporeans don't understand what democracy is, Singaporeans are simply happy with the way the government functions in their country. Compared to their Southeast Asian neighbors they enjoy a much nicer standard of living, and the country is remarkably safe.<sup>7</sup> Singaporeans are also able to voice displeasure against the government by voting. Although the PAP regularly enjoys election results of around 70% of the vote, Singaporeans can still voice their displeasure with the PAP by voting against them in elections.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "GDP per capita (current US\$) - All countries and economies." *World Bank Data*, The World Bank, 2021, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GD.PPCAP.CD?most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GD.PPCAP.CD?most_recent_value_desc=true)

<sup>5</sup> "Freedom in the World 2020 - Singapore" *Freedom House*, FreedomHouse, 2020, [freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2020](https://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2020)

<sup>6</sup> Ern Ser, Tan and Wang Zhengxu. "Singapore Country Report - Second Wave of Asian Barometer Survey" *Asian Barometer*, GLOBALBAROMETER, 2007, [asianbarometer.org/publications//2213a082edd47d18f45df57857baef8e.pdf](http://asianbarometer.org/publications//2213a082edd47d18f45df57857baef8e.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> "Singapore ranks 4th safest country in 2021" *Singapore Business Review*, Charlton Media Group, 2021, <https://sbr.com.sg/economy/news/singapore-ranks-4th-safest-country-in-2021>

<sup>8</sup> "Singapore: The World's only successful dictatorship?" *PolyMatter*, PolyMatter, 2021, [youtube.com/Hkxf4SC\\_SBk](https://youtube.com/Hkxf4SC_SBk)

## Thailand

Thailand has changed government multiple times, including 20 constitutions in less than a century.<sup>9</sup> Thailand has struggled to maintain a consistent government and is once again a military-dominant government in 2019. In response, Thailand has seen some of its largest antigovernment protests in a decade. The government engages in vote-buying to rig elections and the military has a large say in how seats are awarded.<sup>10</sup> This is a key difference between Singapore and Thailand. Singapore's election process is relatively corruption free, alongside this Singaporeans do not feel pressured to vote a particular way and the PAP does not engage in vote buying.

## Myanmar

Following the 2020 Military Coup in Myanmar the country has continued its civil war, which is the longest running internal conflict in history.<sup>11</sup> Myanmar has struggled to get the military to relinquish power and to protect the civil rights of minority ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> This is the key area Singapore has succeeded in comparison to Myanmar. The government of Singapore has combated race-based unrest by mandating that the prime minister of the country must alternate

<sup>9</sup> Thavevong, Kittipong. "With 20 constitutions, Thailand joins a select league." *Nationthailand*, The Nation Thailand, 2017, <https://www.nationthailand.com/perspective/30317723>

<sup>10</sup> "Freedom in the World 2021 - Thailand" *Freedom House*, FreedomHouse, 2021, [freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-world/2021](https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-world/2021)

<sup>11</sup> Miliband, David. "How to bring peace to the world's longest civil war." *Time*, Time, 2019, <http://time.com/4597920/myanmar-peace/>

<sup>12</sup> "Freedom in the World 2021 - Myanmar" *Freedom House*, FreedomHouse, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-world/2021>

between the different ethnic groups each election cycle. The country has also worked to diversify neighborhoods and has mandated percentages of racial makeups for communities.<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Philippines***

The Philippines transitioned from autocracy to democracy in 1986 and has maintained relatively free elections since then, but still struggles with both corruption and crime problems. During the 2016 elections it was reported that both violence at polls and vote buying occurred.<sup>14</sup> In comparison, Singapore is a much safer country, reporting a homicide rate of only 0.16 in 2018 where the Philippines reported 6.47.<sup>15</sup> Singapore's elections are also relatively corruption and violence free. Where Singapore and the Philippines are similar is in government approval, citizens of the Philippines are largely happy with their governments current functions, Rodrigo Duterte has maintained high approval, largely due to his hard stance on crime.<sup>16</sup> This shows how democratic transition in Southeast Asia hasn't necessarily led to an improved quality of life.

### **Implications**

It can be concluded that the relationship between government and society in Singapore is a positive one. I theorized that this relationship was positive because of Singapore's economic success. In my findings, I have found this to not be wrong, but also not wholly true, it is a small part of a much bigger picture. I found that government stability and approval played the largest role in Singapore's positive relation between government and people. My research has concluded that the key for an autocracy to succeed is rooted in two main areas: the autocratic government must first be stable both within the party itself and as rulers of the country. The second key component is that the autocracy must gain the support and favor of its citizens. Economic success is also important, as Singaporeans approval of their government is tied to the prosperity that government brings into their lives. So what does this imply for the rest of the world? Should other countries follow Singapore's lead and try to form their own benevolent autocracies? Not so fast, although Singapore has found a political system that seems to work for the country and its people, my analysis has shown this is a rare feat. Singapore proves that an autocratic government can't be written off as a failure simply by its own nature but it also proves that a lot of specific circumstances are required to create a recipe for success in autocracies. I think a further study of how Singapore as an autocracy compares to the democracies of the world would give a better understanding of how viable an autocratic government is and if it is preferable to popular democratic systems.

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<sup>13</sup> "Singapore: The World's only successful dictatorship?" *PolyMatter*, PolyMatter, 2021, [youtube.com/Hkxf4SC\\_SBk](https://youtube.com/Hkxf4SC_SBk)

<sup>14</sup> "Freedom in the World 2020 - Philippines" *Freedom House*, FreedomHouse, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/freedom-world/2021>

<sup>15</sup> "Murder/Homicide Rates 1990-2021" *macrotrends*, The World Bank, 2018, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/PHL/philippines/murder-homicide-rate>

<sup>16</sup> Cervantes, Filane "Duterte keeps high approval, trust ratings" *Philippine News Agency*, Philippine News Agency, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1157718>

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