

## Lights, Camera, Legitimacy? Curtains Up on Singapore's National Day Celebrations as a Stage for Nation-Building or Party Glorification



(Source: Reeracoen Singapore)

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### **Dedications**

With love and curiosity, this dissertation is dedicated to my beloved home country of Singapore. Having spent over two decades celebrating National Day with profound levels of patriotism with my family, this project is both a personal and academic tribute to the country that has shaped my identity. In revisiting the very celebrations that have defined my childhood every 9th of August, I hope this work contributes meaningfully to a deeper understanding of Singapore's national celebrations and domestic politics.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Ethics Approval Confirmation and Declaration**

I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group on 29 November 2024.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the functional utility of Singapore's National Day Celebrations (NDP) and National Day Rally (NDR), examining how these events function as political instruments for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to maintain its legitimacy. While existing literature predominantly focuses on the nation-building and sociological aspects of these celebrations, there is a notable gap in the political analysis of these high-profile national events. This research fills this gap by applying theories of regime legitimization, power and authority to understand the ways in which the PAP strategically uses celebrations to reinforce its hegemonic position and cultivate public consent. Through the analysis of these events from 2014 to 2024, and employing both qualitative case study methodology and a novel theoretical framework inspired by the likes of Weber, Gramsci, and Lukes, this dissertation identifies claims of legitimacy within the NDP and NDR. The findings reveal that the PAP not only embeds legitimacy claims within the celebrations but uses a running subliminal narrative enriched with patriotic resonance that conflates the nation with that of the PAP party. Ultimately, this study argues that National Day events are not mere celebrations but carefully orchestrated political performances that contribute to the PAP's enduring resilience and legitimacy in Singapore's political landscape.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

<b>GE</b>	General Election
<b>LHL</b>	Lee Hsien Loong
<b>LKY</b>	Lee Kuan Yew
<b>NDP</b>	National Day Parade
<b>NDR</b>	National Day Rally
<b>PAP</b>	People's Action Party
<b>PM</b>	Prime Minister
<b>RLF</b>	Regime Legitimation Framework
<b>RQ</b>	Research Question
<b>SG</b>	Singapore

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation investigates the role and political utility of nationwide celebrations in Singapore, interrogating whether and how they serve as potential legitimization strategies for political parties in Singapore. As such, the research question driving this study is: *To what extent are the Singapore National Day Celebrations a political instrument for the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) legitimacy?* The celebrations are composed of the National Day Parade (NDP) and National Day Rally (NDR) Address by the Prime Minister (PM). Often presented with the intention to strengthen national identity and stoke nationalistic bricolage - they represent a highly ritualised annual endeavour to “inculcate a civil religion that directs favour and fervour toward the nation” (Ortmann, 2009; Kong, 1995: 447). Prominent literature include works by Leong (2001) and Ho (2016) inter alia. They focus almost exclusively on the sociological function of glorifying the nation and the synthetic manufacture of a culture of civic pride and patriotism within Singaporeans, portraying aforementioned celebrations as apolitical events.

However, this project aims to transcend superficial psycho-sociological veneers, and move decisively into the political domain. It seeks to thoroughly probe for possible alternative political functions and strategic purposes behind such lavish orchestrated fanfare, investigating the possibility of celebratory events being weaponised as a political tool through which the PAP reinforces and augments its exceptionally steady political monopoly as the incumbent party since independence in 1965. The deliberate decision to center this project specifically on National Day celebrations rather than any other festivals or state events requires further explanation. By virtue of its scale, visibility and national reach, the National Day Celebrations command a unique level of mass participation and media attention that makes it the singular event in the national calendar unmatched with any other, which will be further discussed in Chapter 2. This dissertation is important because it explores the political dimensions of Singapore's National Day celebrations without assuming a predefined agenda on the part of the ruling party. It begins with the unprejudiced initial premise conjecturing that the national day celebrations are apolitical and impartial, not politicised from the outset. With a hyper-cautious approach to research design, this project avoids projecting unfair preconceived notions about the PAP's tactics, objectively analysing until any evidence suggests otherwise.

By examining whether Singaporean national day celebrations are neutral or politically charged, this research deepens understanding of domestic politics and how national events can be mobilized to shape public sentiment and political allegiance. Especially for scholars of media studies, political culture or political communication, it offers an original framework for assessing how national events could be strategically used to sway public perception or reinforce political agendas. This project is particularly important as it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by investigating for a political agenda behind such celebrations, particularly within the context of Singapore's highly controlled political landscape. The study hopes to enrich political discourse for Singaporean citizens by analysing the manner in which authoritative narratives could be constructed and effectively communicated by those in power. Beyond Singapore, these findings offer comparative value, deepening scholarship on the ways in which both democratic and non-democratic nations may instrumentalise similar national events for political purposes, informing future scholars on the intersection of party strategy, regime legitimization and socio-cultural dynamics.

# Literature Review

## 1.1. Understanding Singapore & the People's Action Party (PAP)

Globally admired for its remarkable economic success and exceptional political stability in a region often plagued by racial-religious conflict and political upheaval, Singapore is a prosperous cosmopolitan city-state located in Southeast Asia (Turnbull, 2009). Spanning just 710 square kilometers, the 'little red dot' is home to approximately 5 million people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Despite its size, it prides itself on being a leading financial center and a world-class transportation hub (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has functioned as a parliamentary democracy in form, but in practice has been dominated by a single political force—the People's Action Party (PAP), whose uninterrupted rule and overwhelming electoral dominance make it an exceptional case of one-party longevity in a nominally democratic system (Zhu, 2023). George and Donald (2020: 40) describe the PAP party as "a national movement, comparable to a religion." Slater (2010: 230) similarly crowns the PAP regime as "the strongest authoritarian Leviathan in all of Southeast Asia." Psychologically, Vasil (2000) describes a strong "symbiosis" between the PAP party and the nation, where average Singaporeans form subconscious logical equivalences with favourable national development and capable PAP leaders. The PAP's electoral dominance is rooted in its adept mastery of valence politics - first articulated by Stokes (1963), where the party manages public perception and bolsters its credibility by leveraging its first-mover advantage over the political scene since the nation's genesis in 1965, to entrench an unrivaled grip on Singapore's political landscape (Oliver & Ostwald, 2020). The PAP's image as a clean, efficient party with zero tolerance for corruption—and the public's general acceptance of this reputation can be factored into explaining the PAP government's anomalously stable grip on power across decades (Quah, 2001). A revealing insight into PAP party self perception comes from the PAP's founding father - Lee Kuan Yew (hereafter LKY) himself: "I make no apologies that the PAP is the government, and the government is the PAP (Milne and Mauzy, 1990: 85)." This striking statement offers a rare glimpse into the party's identity construction, articulating a political narrative that frames the PAP party and the machinery of government as one and the same.

Despite the presence of a small degree of effective opposition politicians, scholars such as Hamilton-Hart (2000: 202) characterize its political structure as 'essentially monolithic,' citing the absence of robust institutional checks and balances within formal politics. While legal institutions are praised for its competence, critics argue they still lack independence from the executive (Seow, 1997). Goh et al. (2024) notes that freedoms typically associated with Anglo-Saxon liberal democracies are heavily curtailed. State apparatus like the Internal Security Act and the more recent 2019 Prevention of Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) sharply restrict press and creative freedom, especially on politically sensitive issues. As a tightly regulated 'nanny state,' the Singaporean government—virtually synonymous with the PAP—exercises broad discretionary power across the political landscape (Kuah, 2018).

## **1.2. Understanding Singapore's National Day Parade (NDP) Celebrations**

The National Day Parade is Singapore's annual celebration of independence, held every 9th August. It showcases grand displays of patriotic performances, a military parade, marches by civil and military forces, and a 21-gun salute (Leong, 2001). The NDP features high-tech displays, including aerial flybys and fireworks, creating a visually captivating experience (Chew, 2000). A product of over 8 months of meticulous preparations, every element in the parade is “orchestrated, closely supervised and delimited.” (Leong, 2001:6). Over decades, Chng (2000) has observed NDP to have evolved into “mass entertainment” designed to strategically engage the public emotionally. Lee (2004) argues that NDP has become a commodity to be ‘consumed’, employed as a cultural engagement cum popularisation strategy to render the ‘nation’ culturally, socially and aesthetically pleasing to ‘consumers’ or Singaporean citizens. The parade invites ‘consumers’ to subconsciously internalise the sights and sounds of nationhood in a palatable and ‘cool’ way - with Kurin (1995:12) supporting Lee’s suggestion that the capturing of ‘broad public sentiments’ can be wielded to ‘valourise and legitimate stances by governments, peoples or communities’. Hence while scholars have hinted at the NDP’s potential politicisation, systematic research on this aspect remains scant.

This dissertation highlights the state’s concerted effort to maximize the reach and accessibility of the parade, with extensive multi-platform live broadcasting and catch-up options that break spatial and linguistic barriers. Providing quantitative insights to the parade’s engagement, published reports from Mediacorp (2015) reveal record viewership in 2015 with live coverage of the NDP parade across all of its channels reaching an upward of 2.22 million viewers, and Toggle registering 371, 708 streams combining both live and catch-up views<sup>1</sup>. Beyond private viewing, the parade is streamed in public spaces such as community centers, and shopping districts with heavy footfall (TodayOnline, 2013). Additionally, 16 city-centre bus stops screened the NDP on 55-inch LED displays, showcasing the depth of technological penetration of the parade (ActiveSGCircle, 2024). Evidently, sizable state resources have been expended to embed the spectacle of NDP within the rhythms of daily urban life, becoming inescapably present by virtue of its saturation in the visual and auditory experience of regular citizens. The omnipresence of the spectacle ensures voluntary or involuntary citizen exposure, hence such saturation and reach evidently raise the value of interrogating the NDP as a potential avenue for politicisation and instrument of political legitimization.

## **1.3. Understanding Singapore's Prime Minister National Day Rally (NDR) Address**

Held in August typically on the weekend following the NDP, the National Day Rally (NDR) is an annual oratorical address by the Prime Minister to the nation. Originally a closed-door meeting, the NDR was first held in 1966 privately for grassroots leaders. 1971 became the first year in which PM LKY decided to have NDR televised for the nation, quickly becoming “a fixture on the political calendar” (The Straits Times, 2016). Delivered in all four national languages<sup>2</sup> to maximize outreach, the English Rally is the most detailed in substance (Singh, 2016). Televised live with translated subtitles over TV, radio and internet, the NDR is a carefully orchestrated event, lasting for several hours, and serves as the only

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation would like to note that Mediacorp has only published viewership numbers of both the parade and rally for the years of 2015 and 2016. It is unclear why this is so.

<sup>2</sup> The officially recognised national languages of Singapore include English, Mandarin Chinese, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil.



oratorical component of the larger National Day celebrations (Tan, 2007). Framed as a "rhetorical hybrid", NDR blends government policy announcements with celebrations of national identity, serving as the country's equivalent of the United States' State of the Union Address (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Tay, 2001). It is a platform for the government to explain and justify its past actions or even lapses in policy calls, as well as to reassure the public of its competence and vision for the future (Tan, 2007; Ortmann, 2009). Chong (2006) draws attention to the predictable yearly format in which the NDR calls for unity under the professional and technocratic leadership of PAP aristocracy, reinforcing the notion that without the talented and uncorrupt PAP, the country would not be able to survive. Mediacorp (2015) reports the year 2015 as having the highest viewership since 2001, with a record 1.62 million viewers tuned in live to watch PM Lee Hsien Loong's address. This widespread attention underscores the NDR's potential as a vehicle for political messaging, making it a key site for examining the interplay between public communication and regime legitimacy.

#### **1.4. Political Legitimacy and Its Role in PAP's Singapore**

Spencer (1970) and Weber (1978) defines political legitimacy as the acceptance and recognition by the governed of the right of a political system or ruler to rule. The commands of a legitimate political authority will subsequently be followed with a low risk of subversive disobedience emerging from among the ruled. Booth and Seligson (2009: 3-4) introduce a metaphor of a 'stock' or 'reservoir' of legitimacy as an essential ingredient of durable long term rule, whereby in the case of crises or threats to legitimacy, citizens are able to reasonably extrapolate into the future assuming regime decisions will remain stable and predictable. Tyler (2006: 377) argues that this accumulated 'reservoir of support' safeguards regime survival, functioning as a buffer for authorities to endure turbulence without excessive fear of collapse.

Traditional conceptions of legitimacy emphasize key factors such as accountability, efficiency, procedural fairness, and distributive fairness (Bekkers and Edwards, 2016). However, these notions are limited in that they focus predominantly on formal structures and legal processes, without fully accounting for the subjective dimensions of legitimacy—particularly how citizens' perceptions and psychological factors interact with institutional structures. In response, Weatherford (1992) proposes a more dynamic perspective, where political legitimacy emerges from the reciprocal relationship between institutional actions and public opinion, a nexus that determines both governance and citizen support.

Despite its perceived dominance, the PAP faces increasing challenges, particularly from a younger and more technologically savvy voting demographic (Barr & Skrbis, 2008). Mutalib (1992: 82) notes a rising appeal of Western ideals, such as democracy and individualism, which resonate with Singaporeans more critical of traditional authority or "the establishment". Khong (1995) and Narine (2004: 34) stress the lesser-known insecurities of PAP's legitimacy, suggesting the PAP experiences constant uncertainty on the true nature of its support base and extent of loyal broad-based political support. A clear connection emerges between the PAP's projected hegemonic strength and underlying insecurities that necessitate forceful legitimization strategies. As such, this dissertation begins with the reasonable premise that every political party takes action to continuously affirm and strengthen its claims to legitimacy. It hypothesizes that using the vehicle of celebrations, the PAP employs twin legitimization strategies stemming from an initial position of hegemonic strength, and a complementary pillar that is driven by insecurity about the PAP's continued relevance and support.

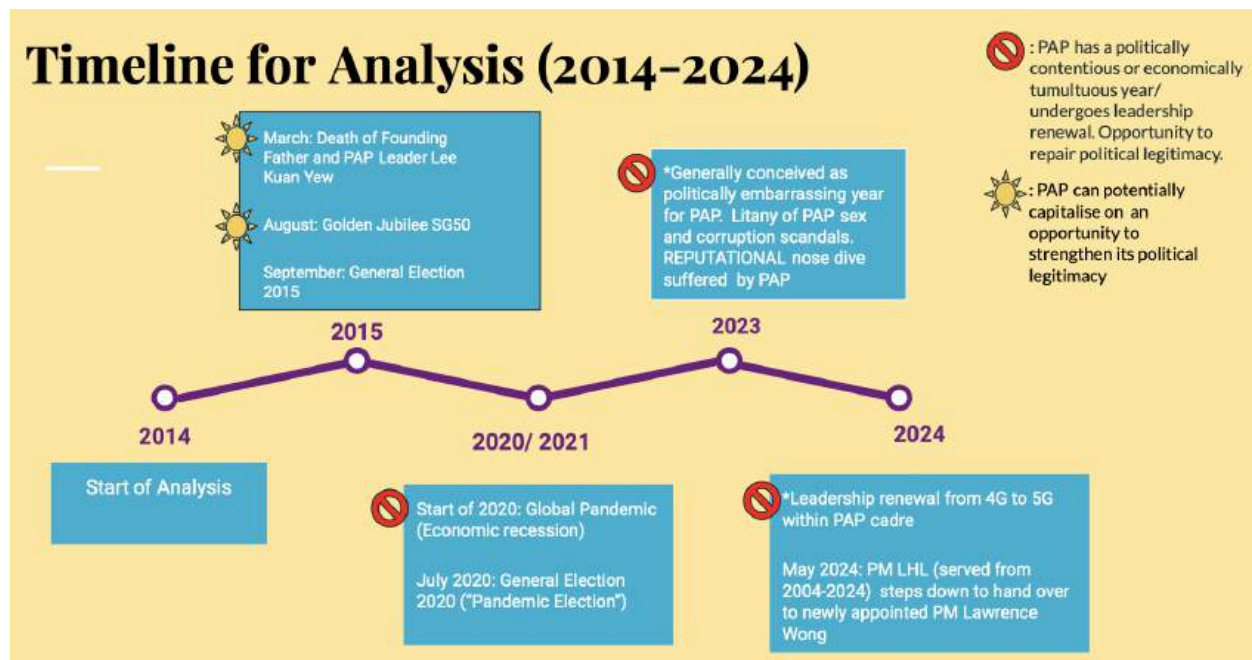
### **1.5. History on PAP's Instrumentalisation of Legitimation Strategies**

A political instrument is defined as any tool, mechanism, or method employed to shape agendas, implement policies, or exert influence over a population (Bähr, 2016). These instruments can be utilized either through non-coercive, softer means of power or violent tactics, and can operate on legal, cultural, or economic grounds (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2007). Tae (1969) attributes PAP's anomalously tight grip on power to PAP's unapologetic reliance on hard power and the mobilization of security apparatuses, such as the Societies Ordinance, as well as grassroots systems like the Citizens Consultative Committees, which serve as informants at the local level. Tremewan (2016), in his ironically banned book on social control in Singapore, traces the PAP's use of military force and draconian security tactics back to the post-colonial era. Under the auspices of protecting national security, PAP has been alleged to unfairly jail political opponents or outspoken critics who pose a threat to the PAP regime (Nam, 1969). Lee (2021) critiques the recent 2019 'anti-fake news' POFMA law- Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act as espousing one-way 'disciplining narratives' silencing deviants against the establishment, while Tan (2016) highlights the sponsorship of nationalistic nostalgia coupled with heavy handed censorship of political films by the PAP government as outright attempts to protect hegemonic PAP narratives. Accordingly, Chua (2002) posits that already-hegemonic PAP authority enables visible weaponization of political instruments to be rationalized, critiqued, and defended. Inspired by historical precedents of PAP's activities, this project investigates for the persistence and possible evolution of aforementioned attempts to entrench PAP's authority within the scope of national day celebrations.

## Chapter 2: Methodology & Theory

This project primarily analyzes publicly available NDP broadcasts and Prime Ministerial NDR transcripts. Secondary sources include scholarly analyses of state rituals, nation-building, and party legitimization strategies in Singapore. Building on existing research, this dissertation introduces a novel Regime Legitimation Framework (RLF) to guide a desk-based qualitative approach combining visual and discourse analysis. Chapters 5-7 applies the RLF to set the parameters of what constitutes the potential ways in which the NDP and NDR could be instrumentalized as political instruments to strengthen the legitimacy of the PAP.

### 2.1. Timeline & Case Study Justification



Covering a full decade from 2014 to 2024, this dissertation adopts a focused case study approach centered on three pivotal periods in the PAP's recent history. These selected years—2015, 2020–2021, and 2023–2024—are conceptualized as distinct case studies, each marked by heightened political, social, or leadership tensions. von Haldenwang (2017) examines “transition periods”- tumultuous phases of fragility marked by political conflict that necessitates moves towards reconstruction and reform. Finkel and Brudny (2012) and Mazepus et al (2016) support the point that new external circumstances such as leadership shake ups or corruption allegations are major catalysts that set in motion legitimacy-consolidating mechanisms in response to regime-endangering crises. This dissertation hypothesizes that the PAP intensifies legitimization strategies or claims to legitimacy especially in reaction to critical turning points in which party legitimacy status is threatened or requires strengthening. Focusing on high-stakes or transitional moments, this case study approach isolates periods when such efforts are likely to be most amplified. This methodology design enables targeted and narrower analysis of spectacle and discourse in response to perceived threats.

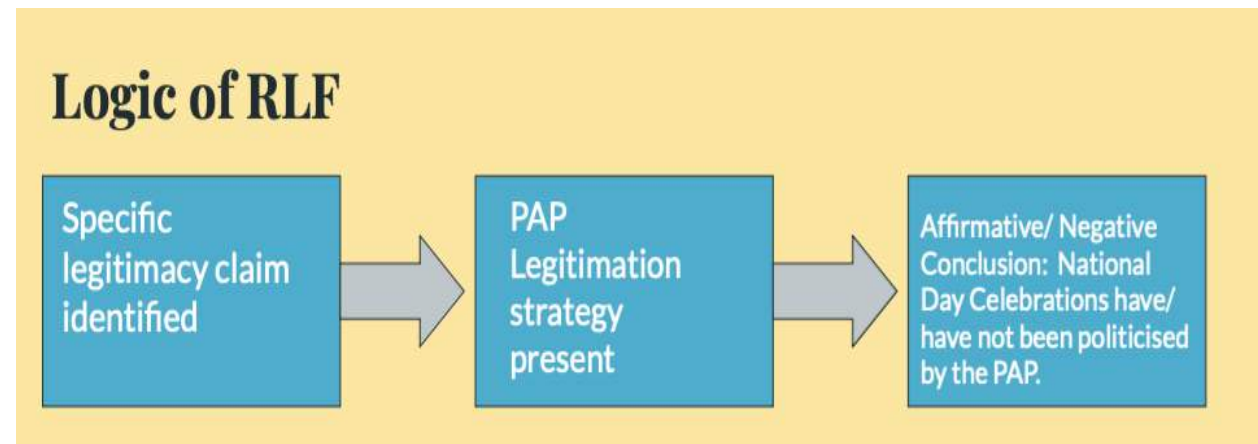
A key limitation of this approach is the overt focus on the identification and analysis of PAP's claims to legitimacy, rather than offering a holistic view of celebrations. By targeting segments in which PAP agenda seems afoot, there lies an inherent risk of overstating the extent of politicisation of the celebrations while ignoring or overlooking portions of the parade and rally that are genuinely rooted in fostering national pride and patriotism that lies outside the scope of analysis. Therein lies a concern of cherry-picking with its wilful emphasis on the most salient examples of politicised content that align with the RQ's thrust. Accordingly, this dissertation deems it necessary to clarify that it does not claim that the entirety of the celebrations are subsumed for partisan purposes.

Recognising this identified blind spot, the dissertation acknowledges broader patriotic elements that exist alongside politicized narratives, but dedicates some portion of the analysis to identify ways in which seemingly apolitical rituals may subtly reinforce PAP legitimacy beneath their nationalistic veneer. This tension—between the surface-level normalcy of the celebrations and the underlying politicization discernible through close analysis—thus becomes an even more exciting and critical arena of inquiry. While to the casual observer the parades and rallies may seem straightforwardly nationalistic, a deeper investigation reveals how selective elements are subtly weaponized to reinforce the ruling party's legitimacy.

## 2.2. Regime Legitimation Framework

This chapter introduces a novel Regime Legitimation Framework (RLF) drawing on Weber's concept of political authority, Gramsci's hegemony, and Lukes' theory of power. These theories suit Singapore's context, given the PAP's entrenched dominance. Weber highlights authority types, especially charisma and tradition, while Gramsci and Lukes reveal how legitimacy can be built through consent, ideology, and cultural control beyond formal institutions. Together, they offer a robust lens for analyzing a nominally democratic, one-party system.

As shown in page 15 , the Regime Legitimation Framework evaluates both platforms across three dimensions: (1) Performance Legitimacy, (2) Charismatic Legitimacy, and (3) Discursive Authoritative Legitimacy. Each is substantiated by empirically observable indicators, providing heuristic tools to guide analysis. Under this framework, the logic follows: any identified claim signals the PAP's strategic use of the celebrations for political ends, confirming their politicisation as tools of party legitimization.



### What is Weber's Theory of Political Authority?

Weberian typology of political authority has provided the scaffolding upon which my RLF begins to take shape. Charismatic authority rests on the force of a strong leader's personality, dependent on 'the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative pattern or order revealed or ordained by him' (Weber, 1978: 215). Traditional authority is propped up by constant reference to longstanding political traditions which are widely accepted as natural or self-evident within a given societal order. This category of authority rests on 'an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under rule' (Weber, 1978: 215). These typologies of authority are used as launchpads to form the RLF's categories of (1) charismatic legitimacy and (2) discursive-authoritative legitimacy to be detailed further on page 15.

### What is Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony & Lukes' Theory of Power?

'Hegemony' as expounded on by Gramsci forefronts the idea that man is not simply governed by force alone, but through ideas. He ascribes the paramount role of ideas in preserving the "ideological unity of a whole social bloc" (Gramsci, 1971: 55). Hegemony, by extension refers to a circumstantial condition which sees political entities vindicated, legitimated by the consensual "public opinion" of the ruled - secured by the successful propagation and normalization of the preferred worldview as espoused by the ruling elites. When legitimacy wanes and hegemonic political entities face challenges, coercive mechanisms are employed to discipline dissenters and restore hegemony. Gramsci effectively locates true dominion as the locus of power, authority and legitimacy within the grasp of an ideologically dominant group, and its ability to control culture and channels of communication and information transmission in civil society. Bates (1975) reinforces the advantages bestowed on the incumbent by virtue of their superior organisation and pre-existing resource pool. Tapping into Steven Lukes' (2005) theory of power, the RLF views hegemony as both an outcome as well as an political tool that operates to reinforce itself by dictating acceptable norms and desirable societal preferences and behaviours. He posits that power works not merely through coercion or threat, but also by subtly restricting individual choices and inhibiting them from acting according to their own judgement (Lukes, 2005: 85). Real power evolves in sophistry with its quiet framing of desirable social norms or political behaviours, limiting those subject to it incapacitated in their ability to imagine alternative realities. Through Gramsci and Lukes, (3) Discursive authoritative legitimacy emerges in the RLF, effectively capturing the manner in which political legitimacy manifests by setting the terms of discourse, normalising a certain favoured outlook and preference, and pre-emptively intercepting opposition or alternative political arrangements from gaining traction, often without any overt show of force. This nuanced conceptualisation is especially crucial in filtering how the PAP exercises regime legitimisation in a one-party dominant state.

### **Operationalising Theory: Setting Up Legitimacy Claims within RLF**

- (1) **Performance legitimacy:** The value of material deliverables as substantive proof in justifying PAP's political legitimacy and authority to rule is hardly overstated. As Huntington (1991) notes, it is unsurprising for maintenance of popular perception of a regime's right to rule to hinge on its capacity to provide economic welfare policies and infrastructural success. Tannenberg et al. (2019) poses the question: "To what extent does the government refer to performance (such as providing economic growth, poverty reduction, good government, and/or providing security) in order to justify the rule of the regime in place?" In context, Richards (1936) underscores PAP rhetoric consistently revolving the 'co-presence' of economics and patriotism, situating the PAP's

exceptional economic successes squarely within celebratory fanfare. Tan (2007) concludes that NDP speeches and displays act as arenas for strong justifying arenas for PAP authority via reminders of its propensity to deliver stellar economic performance. Identifying performance legitimacy hence forms part of the larger investigation when scrutinizing NDP and NDR.

- (2) **Charismatic Legitimacy:** Adapted from Weber's typology, Tannenber et al. (2019) similarly asks : "To what extent is [the leader] portrayed as being endowed with an extraordinary personal characteristics and/or leadership skills (e.g. as father or mother of the nation, exceptionally heroic, moral, pious, or wise, or any other extraordinary attribute valued by the society)?" Weber (1968: 1112) postulates that this particular authority type has a tendency to emerge in extraordinary circumstances of high distress or political instability, folding neatly into the case-study approach that checks for possible politicization strategies especially in times of aggravated societal tensions. Conger (1993) reveals a routine institutionalisation of charismatic authority transitioning successfully into permanent political traditions. Prevailing literature hints at claims of charismatic legitimacy - with Lam and Tan (1999) centering the role of LKY and his 'lieutenants' embedded within a narrative of gratitude for pioneer generations. Brown (2000: 53) argues that "state elites claim that they themselves are the objects of patriotic loyalty, and it is they who articulate the true will of the collective nation", while Loh (1998) shows the bravery and foresight of the PAP pioneers being memorialised into the "Singapore Story". Given PAP's proven record of such efforts to elevate public perception, charismatic legitimacy henceforth constitutes a key axis to assess the potential politicisation of the celebrations.
- (3) **Discursive - Authoritative legitimacy:** This claim finds strong grounding in Gramsci's (1948) theory of hegemony, which contends that legitimacy is conferred not just by coercion but through consent of the governed vis-à-vis discourse (language, narrative-building and persuasion), alongside tangible signals of authority (symbols of power, institutional dominance). In this logic, the PAP's persistent invocation of a crisis narrative and future-oriented oratorical posturing serve as hegemonic tools—reproducing the notion that the PAP is uniquely capable to steer the nation safely forward. This discursive strategy taps on shared fears, aspirations, and imagined futures to consolidate public consent, naturalising PAP stewardship via a language of inevitability. As Bates (1975) observes, incumbent authorities enjoy structural and material advantages that enable ideological domination. By virtue of its incumbency, PAP possesses the means of authoritatively framing national discourse with their power to pre-empt dissent by shaping what is perceived as normal, rational, and acceptable political thought. Lukes (2005) highlight its insidious nature to shape preferences and silence opposition even before it materialises. This project henceforth advances discursive- authoritative legitimacy - be it through speech acts, ideological narratives or hegemonic framing that constitute its arsenal, this inches toward answering whether a political agenda is embedded within the spectacle.

## RLF for Singaporean National Day Celebrations

Grounded in aforementioned theory, this project offers an original framework to filter and analyse the NDP and NDR for each case study.

Type of Legitimacy Claim	Indicators of Attempts at Regime Legitimation
Performance legitimacy	<p>Characterised by visible displays of <b>favourable PAP results relating to economic, material development and maintenance of social stability</b>, with a clear demonstration of an alignment between the PAP regime's performance and favourable national successes.</p> <p>Potentially manifest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Report card' reminders of proof of the regime's economic and welfare successes, perhaps by speeches or visual elements</li> <li>- Review of past successful policies implemented by PAP government</li> </ul>
Charismatic legitimacy	<p>Characterised by a <b>cult of personality</b> surrounding a specific PAP leader, and tangible efforts to deepen the <b>parasocial relationship</b> between the ruler (or de facto PAP figure) and the ruled. This specific legitimacy claim connects the positive and alluring qualities of the PAP leader directly with the public perception of the PAP party itself, fuelling political legitimacy into the party.</p> <p>Potentially manifest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotionally resonant performances, skits or commemorative tributes focused on the leader's personal qualities and past successes</li> <li>- Verbal rhetoric that praises the leader, glorifying the leader's successes and already-established degree of favorability and existing levels of legitimacy within the public imaginary. Attempts made to conflate the positive attributes of the leader into the eventual legitimization of the party, due to the inextricable link between the leader as the face of the party and the party itself.</li> </ul>
Discursive -Authoritative legitimacy	<p>Characterised by the <b>dissemination of favourable justificatory narratives and ideological framing</b> perpetuated by the PAP about itself.</p> <p>Potentially manifest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PAP party-friendly infamous historical use of a hegemonic <b>perpetual crisis narrative</b> suggesting that the Singaporean nation is perpetually in danger, with the extended claim that the PAP is the only party capable and proven to decisively lead the country into the future.</li> </ul> <p>Characterised by the articulation of vague abstractions into perceived reality and by direct assertions of authority.</p> <p>Potentially manifest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Future-looking language and anticipatory confidence that the PAP will continue as government in the next election cycle</li> <li>- Direct calls for continued electoral support for PAP government, requesting for votes and cooperation from Singaporean citizens</li> </ul>

Charging ahead with the above framework in mind, Chapters 3 to 5 focus selectively on either the NDP or NDR—whichever is more politically salient for a given year—and where both are analysed, they are presented in chronological order.

### Chapter 3: Case Study Analysis of Year 2015

The year 2015 was a watershed moment, seeing 3 deeply significant events occurring within a matter of months: the death of Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) in March, the SG50 Golden Jubilee milestone celebrations in August, and the General Election (GE) in September (Chin, 2016). Chapter 3 examines the hypothesis that the People's Action Party (PAP) mobilised legitimisation strategies — particularly those centred on the "LKY factor" — to full effect in this politically consequential year. Due to high stakes in place for PAP to secure a strong parliamentary mandate in the September elections, this chapter explores the possibility afforded by the unique contextual convergence of mourning and celebration which provides fertile ground for legitimisation opportunities for the PAP to tap into public grief, collective gratitude and elevated patriotism.

#### 2015 NDP Parade

(Available at <https://youtu.be/pxWKQ1-VsJA?si=ncskY0tNF4fVCKbr> )

The 2015 NDP greatly leveraged charismatic legitimacy with the 'LKY factor', whose recent passing fueled a potent narrative of myth-making. A significant portion of the parade was devoted to tributes focused on his personal qualities and achievements, using emotionally resonant theatrical displays to solidify his enduring legacy. **Charismatic legitimacy claims** were identified through the emotional tone set by the emcees, particularly at 28:20 when they remarked, "his absence today is sorely felt by all in Singapore", framing LKY as indispensable to every Singaporean. The montage included poignant footage of LKY's funeral and the period of national mourning, with military salutes and interviews of ordinary Singaporeans who had willingly queued for long hours to pay their respects. At 29:11/29:23, the tribute with a young LKY during his prime giving speeches and participating in community initiatives interspersed with eyebrow-raising inclusions of LKY's son, the sitting Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (LHL), as a young boy accompanying his father (Figure 1 and 2). This innocuous inclusion of the younger Lee could be perceived as a familial passing of a torch from a well loved LKY and the current PAP Secretary General, thus visually encoding dynastic PAP succession and continuity. The tribute also included interviews, some of whom remarked, "When I see him, I always think of my grandpa" (30:41) and "Thank you, Mr LKY, for making SG so beautiful" (31:21), acting as reminders for the masses' deep affection for the man and his legacy.

This narrative was solidified by the montage's focus on LKY's exceptional contributions to Singapore's nation-building, economic progress, and social stability, all clear barometers of **performance legitimacy claims**. At 31:43, the camera dramatically panned to an empty seat where LKY would have sat had he been alive, placing a single Vanda Miss Joaquim, the national flower, in tribute (Figure 3). This overt gesture of symbolic legitimisation framed against the visible presence of PAP elites, converts the personal charisma of LKY into institutional credibility for his PAP party. Powerful attempts at **discursive-authoritative legitimacy** have therein been identified to associate the greatness of LKY with



that of his son, the sitting PM as well as the entirety of the PAP party. The **visual dominance of PAP politicians on screen** is a striking feature, as observed in Figure 4. Though opposition politicians may occasionally appear, the overwhelming presence of PAP politicians creates an implicit association between the ruling party and nation-building. These subtle visual cues serve as rhetorical devices—**without the need for explicit verbal rhetoric**, they affirm the PAP's role in guiding Singapore through both past crises and future challenges. Political figures are often subtly integrated into the flow of the parade, and this careful distribution of political imagery is designed to evoke national pride without overtly politicizing the event, while still maintaining the connection between the ruling party and the nation's success. The overall effect is one of subtlety—political elements are sprinkled throughout the celebrations, not overtly foregrounded, but never entirely absent.

The climax of the Singapore Armed Forces' tribute to LKY's legacy in NDP 2015 at 32:03 - marked by the Black Knights flypast in a five-star formation, is not just a dramatized display of military power, but a concerted attempt at reinforcing the LKY/PAP friendly hegemonic narrative already in place, using militarised state apparatus to symbolically conflate the force of LKY's character and legacy with the PAP party and the nation at large. The combination of emotional grief as well as theatrical epicness speaks volumes of how the parade has been instrumentalized for PAP strides in legitimacy. This discursive-authoritative legitimacy claim riding off the LKY factor is amplified in the parade's final segment as seen in Figure 5, where a pre-recorded video of PM Lee Hsien Loong at 2:30:53 asks parade viewers, "What will our next 50 years be like? I say, it depends on you [...] Chase that rainbow." This neatly positions PM Lee as the guiding authority for Singapore's future, linking national progress and optimism directly to continued PAP leadership. Across NDP2015, claims of LKY's **charismatic legitimacy** were evidently folded into **discursive-authoritative legitimacy** in a politically charged narrative.



**Figure 1:** Archival footage from a screened montage of Lee Kuan Yew in his prime, with the notable inclusion of his son, Lee Hsien Loong—sitting Prime Minister as of 2015. *NDP 2015* [29:06].



**Figure 2:** Another screenshot from a tribute montage featuring a young Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the foreground, subtly reinforcing dynastic continuity. *NDP 2015* [29:26]



**Figure 3:** An empty chair symbolizing the seat where Lee Kuan Yew would have sat if he were alive, with Singapore's national flower placed in his honor. *NDP 2015* [31:50]



**Figure 4:** Camera pans from the audience to showcase parliamentary politicians, with key PAP officials in the front row, capitalising the screen and dominating the visual imagery in *NDP 2015* [1:18:36]



**Figure 5:** Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong closing the parade with an inspirational call for Singapore's future. *NDP 2015* [2:30:52]

## 2015 NDR Rally

(Available at <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/national-day-rally-2015> )

NDR 2015 began with a tribute to honoring the late founding prime minister and PAP pioneer, - a clear claim to tapping and holding onto LKY's charismatic legitimacy by the PAP. Local singer Kit Chan performed "Home," explicitly dedicating the well-loved national day song to LKY (Figure 6). At 2:36, Chan's introduction of the song—"This one is for LKY"—was accompanied by a visual backdrop of the empty seat from the NDP tribute. A strategic harnessing of residual emotional capital, these staged tributes repurpose mourning into **charismatic legitimacy**—reinforcing PAP's continued stewardship, to be further elaborated by the PM in his upcoming speech. Next, a deliberative analysis of PM LHL's rhetoric reveals the operationalisation of **discursive - authoritative legitimacy** by speaking abstract conceptions of the trust built between the PAP government and the people into reality, stating, "We have kept our promises, what we said we would do, we did do. We have kept our politics honest." This retrospective legitimation segued into a future-oriented claim at 28:58—"From time to time, new tough issues will come up and we will need your support to deal with them"—a strategic appeal that discursively linked past success with a presumed future mandate for continued rule. The speech's forward-looking register, paired with rhetorical assurances of moral intent at 31:11 ("I believe that I am doing what Singapore needs..."), reinforced the PAP's self-ascribed authority to govern decisively even through politically "painful" decisions. A veiled reference to an assumed strong mandate at the upcoming election was made at 1:08:54, when PM Lee announced future plans to pass legislation to raise the re-employment age, stating, "In other words after the coming election." (Figure 7) This was a light-hearted, seemingly off-the-cuff remark that similarly served as a subtle indication of the PAP's confidence in securing victory as well as a parliamentary supermajority in GE 2015. Together, these moments reflect a classic **discursive-authoritative legitimacy strategy**: asserting a seamless alignment between party and national interest while subtly rendering alternative leadership as unfathomable.



**Figure 6:** Local singer Kit Chan performs a moving tribute to Lee Kuan Yew before the Prime Minister delivers his rally address. *NDR 2015* [2:36]





**Figure 7:** On announcing future plans to raise the re-employment age, PM Lee states, "In other words, after the coming election," prompting laughter from the audience. This remark not only injects humor but also evidences the PAP's hegemonic confidence in retaining government power in the upcoming September 2015 elections. *NDR 2015* [1:08:54]

### **Conclusion for 2015**

This chapter concludes indubitable politicization of both NDP and NDR 2015. Charismatic legitimacy was projected through tributes to LKY, which sanctified his legacy and subtly tethered it to the current leadership under his son, PM LHL. Visual symbolism and sentimental rhetoric blurred the line between familial reverence and political endorsement, deepening the political legitimacy of the ruling party. Simultaneously, discursive-authoritative legitimacy was cultivated through affirmations of trust, performance, and PAP indispensability within NDR, where appeals to future stability were grounded in the party's track record of performance legitimacy. Symbolic gestures—such as the empty chair, military flypast, and deliberate references to policy continuation beyond the election—reinforced a hegemonic vision of Singaporean nationhood, one inextricably linked to PAP stewardship. In sum, the year 2015 reveals the PAP's intensified tactical use of charismatic legitimacy as well as its command over symbolic and rhetorically discursive tools to solidify its hegemonic grip on Singapore's political imagination.

## Chapter 4: Case Study Analysis of Year 2020/2021 (Pandemic & Global Economic Recession)

The Covid-19 crisis proved to be both economically tumultuous and socially difficult for Singapore, with 2020 marking its worst recession since independence in 1965. Amid this instability, PAP called a so-called ‘pandemic election’ in July—just a month before the annual National Day celebrations. GE2020 saw a notable erosion in PAP’s vote share and the loss of a key constituency to the Workers’ Party, reflecting growing opposition support (Singh and Tan, 2020). In a context that invited scrutiny of PAP insecurity, this chapter examines the extent to which the 2020 celebrations functioned as a political instrument to reaffirm weakened legitimacy. As the crisis extended into 2021, the PAP presented itself as the steady hand guiding national recovery. Chapter 6 probes whether the pandemic offered a chance for PAP to double down on its favoured crisis narrative during national day celebrations as tools of legitimization to reinforce its leadership credentials during a period of weakened political capital and economic uncertainty. Specifically for 2020 and 2021, a choice was made to hone in solely on the NDR delivered by PM LHL, as both NDPs—significantly scaled down, decentralised, and dispersed across multiple venues due to pandemic restrictions—departed markedly from pre-pandemic formats and thus offer reduced analytical value for analysing political legitimization (TODAY, 2021).

### 2020 NDR Rally

(Available at [https://youtu.be/tK\\_S3qmvhcE?si=3hd2b8J\\_tMb4fdU8](https://youtu.be/tK_S3qmvhcE?si=3hd2b8J_tMb4fdU8) )

In response to the tumultuous global COVID crisis, PM LHL declares in 06:37: “All of us must do our part, but none of us will be alone. **The government is actively helping people find new jobs and acquire new skills.** We also have the Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) and Self-employed person Income Relief Scheme (SIRS) to ease the burden on employers and individuals. The Labour Movement is working with employers to create job training programmes and career pathways. It will also ensure that every worker is treated fairly and with dignity, especially when job losses cannot be avoided.” Especially during this a literal crisis pandemic year - the PAP aggressively shored up its claims of **performance legitimacy**. Concrete policies in the PAP’s crisis response—such as its technical support for those facing job insecurity, and generous economic lifelines—were highlighted in the NDR report card as evidence of deft stewardship. Subliminally, the RLF framework shows this claim to political legitimacy manifesting via the **monopolisation of reassuring language surrounding competency and protection**, conditioning citizens to equate the PAP’s governance with the nation’s survival itself, and rendering alternative non-PAP governance inconceivable or inherently risky. Even within the cloak or guise of welfare provision by the benevolent PAP government, the 2020 NDR unravels under the RLF to show how national day celebrations are being wielded by the PAP to legitimize its continued political dominance in a self-reinforcing manner.

### 2021 NDR Rally

(Available at <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2021-English> )

PM Lee declared in 01:04:45: “As a country, we have many strengths to be proud of [...]. **But our greatest strength is our people** [...] Now, in the crisis of a generation, we have shown ourselves and the

world what Singaporeans can do. [...] **They are our everyday heroes, and they are us.** I thought of them, [...] what we have done together, what we hope to achieve for tomorrow's Singapore. Our people, our unity, our shared dreams – they give meaning to our National Day. [...] **COVID-19 will not be our last crisis. We will surely encounter more trials on the road ahead. We will be tested again, sometimes severely. Each generation will wonder, as their parents and grandparents did: Will we survive? Will Singapore prevail? Will Singaporeans stay together as one people? My answer: We have done it before. We will do it again.**" The 2021 NDR was found to be deployed as a strategic platform to consolidate **performance legitimacy** amid the ongoing socio-economic fallout on Singaporeans even a year after the actual pandemic hit. Due to the anomalous nature of the scale of the crisis experienced, this particular NDR was especially focused on staking claim to performance legitimacy, showcasing the PAP government's handling of the pandemic from 2020 to 2021. By raising PAP policy successes of high vaccination rates across the island and an effective rollout of the Covid defence measures over the past 2 years, the PAP uses the NDR to speak into reality its projected image as competent and reliable leaders with a proven track record of overcoming such a recent crisis whereby Singapore did more merely survive but actually emerged even stronger. Capitalising on the amplification powers afforded to the NDR avenue, the rally was politicized to drive home PAP's status as a crisis navigator —conveniently amplifying public perceptions of the recent successes of PAP government's COVID task force to even greater national attention. Simultaneously, the rally advanced a strong claim to **discursive-authoritative legitimacy**. Through inclusive and emotionally resonant language—such as “we,” “our people,” and “our shared future”—PM Lee subtly integrates and instantiates the party into a highly specific national narrative that celebrates Singaporeans as ‘everyday heroes’. Additionally, the use of future-forward language when mentioning PAP political trajectory and its handling of future crises implies a rather subtle extension of logic that assumes the PAP as decisively laying claim to future ruling. Undoubtedly the use of such linguistic indicators allows this dissertation to trace a subtle but sure hegemonic narrative pushed by the PAP that they are the only viable orchestrators of national unity and bulwarks of certainty. This quiet confidence signals, in Gramscian terms, a mature hegemony—power so internalised it no longer needs loud declarations. Importantly, a close analysis of the NDR transcripts reveals a conspicuous absence of overt propaganda or explicit glorification of the PAP. Ironically, this dissertation finds that it is precisely this absence of direct references to the PAP that signals **a deeper, more assured discursive claim to authority**. The ability to project profound hegemony without the need for explicit self-celebration underscores the PAP's entrenched position within the national imagination. The rally thus operates in a manner that is both explicit and oblique in its political messaging, skilfully maintaining discursive dominance while avoiding the appearance of overt politicisation of the occasion.

### **Conclusion for 2020/2021**

This chapter affirms that the 2020 and 2021 celebrations were mobilised as deliberate instruments of legitimation in response to the PAP's weakened mandate during the GE 2020 pandemic election. All three claims to legitimacy were adapted to address specific vulnerabilities. Bread-and-butter issues like employment gained visibility during prolonged economic uncertainty, prompting a bolder appeal to historical performance legitimacy. Via policy “report cards” of the PAP government's recent pandemic responses, as well as broader hegemonic narratives of resilience and technocratic excellence within discourse that pushed the rendering of alternative governance paths untenable. Crucially, discursive-authoritative legitimacy emerged dominant in the NDR of both years. Interestingly for this

specific case study, PM LHL shifted much of the usual focus away from partisan PAP self-celebration toward celebrating the sacrifice of everyday Singaporeans. This lack of explicit parading of PAP governance reveals a deeper, hegemonic confidence—the PAP’s indispensability no longer required affirmation; it is silently a given. Ultimately, this case study shows celebrations were co-opted as a reactionary move to navigate the crisis and reaffirm the PAP’s role as custodian of Singapore.

## Chapter 5: Case Study Analysis of Year 2023/2024 (Political Scandals & Leadership Renewal)

This chapter navigates two unprecedented years in Singaporean politics. In 2023, a wave of sex and corruption scandals dealt a major blow to the party’s reputation, prompting the need for the PAP to restore public trust and reinforce legitimacy (Ang and Tham, 2023). In 2024, the focus shifted to leadership renewal, as Lee Hsien Loong stepped down after 20 years, and Lawrence Wong delivered his first National Day Rally as Prime Minister. While not a crisis, the political stakes were high, with the PAP needing to position Wong as a capable successor. Chapter 7 thus attempts to investigate the extent to which National Day events are used as potential instruments to bounce back from the reputational nosedive suffered in 2023, as well frame PM Wong’s leadership as stable and in line with PAP’s legacy in 2024—further engaging the research question of how such celebrations could be weaponized to augment PAP political legitimacy.

### 2023 NDR Rally

(Available at <https://www.youtube.com/live/LCcWWbx6pXU?si=7uH3-AaQ3egOUWFR> )

In response to PAP’s tumultuous 2023, PM Lee used the NDR to justify and diminish the corruption scandals and reputational hit absorbed by PAP earlier that year. As seen in 54:05, PM Lee states—**“Integrity and incorruptibility** are fundamental to Singapore. They are the foundation on which we run a **clean and effective Government**, and deliver results for Singaporeans. Mr Lee Kuan Yew considered these the most crucial ideals of all. [...] He reminded us Singapore must always remain clean and incorruptible [...] Otherwise, he said, we are finished. [...] For the sake of the country, I will do all I can to keep faith with Mr Lee’s hope. **No matter the price; no matter the embarrassment or political cost – I will do my utmost to keep the system clean. Every generation of PAP leaders must also stand by this** – this is what Singapore depends upon. The ideals I spoke about are not just abstract aspirations. [...] By upholding these ideals, we have over decades built a high trust society. [...] where the people and the Government trust each other [...] over the past 58 years, and this is how we weathered COVID-19.” Additionally, he adds in 57:49: “Recently, several **controversial issues** have drawn Singaporeans’ attention. [...] **We dealt with each of them thoroughly and transparently.** Let me assure you: these incidents will not delay my timetable for renewal. We are on track.” This chapter affirmatively detects **charismatic legitimacy** woven into **discursive-authoritative legitimacy** claims through the invocation of LKY’s legacy. PM LHL recounts LKY’s final public exhortation on the necessity of maintaining integrity and incorruptibility in government, positioning himself and the People’s Action Party (PAP) as the faithful stewards of these founding ideals set out by the beloved PAP forefather. This move seeks to **elevate and repair the PAP’s claims of superior moral authority in office**, particularly following a year marked by scandalous and hugely consequential violations of public trust. By openly acknowledging the

controversies and scandals that had hit the PAP party earlier in the year as not having a negative impact on the trajectory of planned leadership succession into the Fourth Generation (4G) of PAP leadership, PM LHL is seen to decisively and advantageously utilise this pivotal moment of national attention to flip and reclaim a favourable PAP narrative explicating on the high moral standing of the PAP party that he heralds. With a profound emphasis on the PAP's quick, "[thorough and transparent] response toward allegations of misconduct, the NDR serves as a useful platform to convert a crisis of political legitimacy and trust into an opportunity to bring greater attention to the high moral posturing that the PAP historically lays claim to. Recasting the PAP as not a party weakened by misdemeanor and poor morals, PM LHL instead turns this on its head to project PAP as capable of self-correction and moral stewardship, reinforcing public perception of the PAP as trustworthy and committed to good governance practices.

Next, as LHL's last rally as PM, it was clear that the address to the nation was politicised as he spent a substantial portion of the rally talking about the upcoming and planned leadership succession to the Fourth Generation PAP leadership to be helmed by Lawrence Wong. PM Lee states: "The 4G will soon wrap up the Forward SG exercise, but their journey is just beginning. **Our nation's future depends on them, working as one with you to take Singapore forward.** I have every confidence in Lawrence Wong and his team. **We share the same core convictions – that we are stewards of Singapore,** entrusted with the immense responsibility to lead and care for our nation [...]. My team and I are deeply grateful to you for standing with us through thick and thin. **Please give Lawrence and his team your fullest support too, now and after they take over.**" PM LHL's explicit endorsement of his chosen successor during NDR 2024 is a clear appeal for public support of the 4G leaders—a deliberate attempt to transfer the reservoir of public trust and loyalty accumulated under his premiership. This strategic move signals a direct bid for **discursive-authoritative legitimacy**, converting the NDR into a mechanism for streamlining political succession. The NDR is thus weaponized as a political instrument to position incoming PAP leadership as transparent, trustworthy heirs to the party's relatively smooth legacy. A synthesis of reassurance and moral framing in NDR 2024 underscores this politicisation, with the call for support of 4G leaders conflated with historic faith in the PAP's largely unblemished record. NDR 2024 functions as a clear political tool for the PAP to publicly assert its moral and ethical stance and reinforce its mandate to rule—especially during periods of vulnerability and leadership transition.

## 2024 NDR Rally

(Available at <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2024> )

PM Wong's first NDR address was undeniably high stakes for a new leader seeking to establish his authority. The following aims to delve into his introductory remarks in 06:44 - "Mr Lee Kuan Yew once said that Singapore needs a government that is **both prudent and bold.** That is the approach my team and I will adopt. [...] **To uphold the fundamentals that have served us well, and remain relevant to us.** [...] That is why my team and I embarked on the Forward Singapore exercise. **We have seen what happens in other countries when the broad middle falls behind.** The centre does not hold. **Societies begin to fracture and collapse.** Do not assume this cannot happen here. **It can – and it will – unless we take decisive actions to prevent it.**"

The invocation of the mythos and cult-like furore surrounding LKY in the NDR 2024 is not perceived as a neutral historical gesture but a conscientious attempt to secure a claim to **charismatic legitimacy**. By



aligning the new PM Wong's administration to the "prudent and bold" approach of the the PAP as led by LKY, the NDR acts as an avenue to convey a timeless quality to PAP governance, continuously drawing on the large reservoir of reserve political capital as held by the founding generation of PAP. This drives home how the NDR remains a critical site for refreshing the popular imagination that PAP has a monopoly over Singapore's political destiny as its safeguard and defender even decades after independence. Next, the relentless mobilisation of a **perpetual crisis narrative** lends credence to the PAP's favoured existential threat framing- indicative of a claim to **discursive-authoritative legitimacy**, evoking dire possibilities of Singapore "[fracturing and collapsing]" if "decisive actions" are not taken to prevent that. By presenting the PAP as the party with the foresight and conscious awareness not to allow this horrific reality of chaos and societal collapse to occur, this rhetorical maneuver within NDR 2024 serves not just as a venue to celebrate national success, it also serves a function to perpetuate a textbook example of a PAP friendly narrative of societal precariousness that by extension aids in strengthening regime resilience. As such the identification of legitimization via historical memory as well as managed anxiety further augment the national day celebrations as having been leveraged as a political instrument to sustain PAP regime authority.

## 2024 NDP Parade

(Available at [https://www.youtube.com/live/5vU6N8Sl-w0?si=IR-8lGLJk\\_t-v7aO](https://www.youtube.com/live/5vU6N8Sl-w0?si=IR-8lGLJk_t-v7aO) )

For both NDP and NDR 2024, this dissertation reports a surge in distinct claims to **charismatic legitimacy** folded within a larger and more all-encompassing **discursive authoritative legitimacy**. This year shows the most glaringly obvious exemplification of politicisation, with one entire segment of the concluding chapter of the parade pierced through with a feel-good narrative as articulated by 4 prior prime ministers with one iconic quote amalgamating the character and successes of each of their premierships interspersed during the parade component at 1:42:39 entitled "Together, We Achieve". The very title is a neat capture of PAP claiming direct conflation between the country's success as well as their undisrupted hegemonic leadership and historical lineage of competent PAP PMs. This is a near-perfect example of an explicit ideological narrative perpetuated by the PAP about itself, with the climax of this parade component ended with the newly inaugurated PM Lawrence Wong who took the Premier title in May 2024 of the same year, just 4 months earlier. This neat trajectory and lineage of the trailblazing PAP PMs before Wong crafts a political narrative arc, harkening back the independence struggles of LKY to the aspirational and future-forward message of PM Wong as seen in Figure 8 and 9 respectively. PM Wong's inclusion just months after being sworn into cabinet cannot be understated- it is a **symbolic political anointing moment for the whole nation to witness**. This parade originally meant for state-glorifying purposes has decisively moved into a politicised arena- a public theatre forefronting PAP leadership success, and can be read as a deliberate effort to reassure the citizens of Singapore of continuity vis-a-vis an outward projection of strength by the PAP party, reinforcing the **continuity of stable governance** under the PAP, suggesting a **succession of wisdom and moral authority**, and embedding a **quasi-mythic genealogy** of leadership that links national destiny with the party's elite. This parade segment functions as a mega 'speech act,' where authority is directly asserted by framing the nation's future as inseparable from PAP leadership (Searle, 2014). Theoretical lines blur as **charismatic legitimacy folds into the PAP's authoritative dominance over legitimacy discourse**, linking each PAP leader's personal appeal and iconic characteristics and success of each of their 4 premierships to directly refunnel and strengthen political legitimacy back to the party. Using history, as well as folding in

**performance legitimacy** in association with each leader in distinct eras of Singapore’s political memory, favourable public reception of each of its past leaders is politically funnelled into PM Wong, the new face of the PAP government.



**Figure 8:** Archival footage screened during NDP 2024, narrating the succession of Singapore’s four prime ministers—beginning with founding father Lee Kuan Yew—framing leadership continuity as part of a reverent national legacy. *NDP 2024 [01:42:39]. (46)*



**Figure 9:** Screengrab from NDP 2024 featuring a prominently displayed quote by PM Wong, presenting him as an inspirational and unifying figure during his first National Day Parade as premier. *NDP 2024 [02:17:53] (35)*

## **Conclusion for 2023/2024**

Both iterations of fanfare within 2023 and 2024 attest to being repurposed as potent political means to fortify regime resilience in face of reputational damage and ever-unpredictable leadership transitions. Confronted with dips in public perception specifically with respect to its long-held pride in clean governance principles—the NDR 2023 was deployed to reclaim control over public discourse within civil society, asserting discursive-authoritative legitimacy with marked clarity of PAP’s high moral standards. By 2024, the politicisation of elite renewal within the celebrations was unmistakable. The screen time, imagery, and narrative emphasis given to PM Wong—situated genealogically among his PAP predecessors in both the parade and rally—made party strategy plainly visible. The closing segment of the parade, featuring a seamless lineage of revered PAP Prime Ministers, reinforced that charismatic

legitimacy in Singapore is not innate, but carefully manufactured through curated associations with a glamorized political past.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In interrogating the Singaporean National Day celebrations across the various case studies, this dissertation successfully posits an answer to the RQ- *To what extent are the Singapore National Day Celebrations a political instrument for the ruling PAP's legitimacy?* The following goes- the NDP and NDR have been politicised to a large extent, acting as political instruments for the PAP. While the extent of politicization differs from year to year, this study confirms that national day celebrations are not simply rallying events to infuse nationalistic fervour, but strategic investments by the PAP for its own regime's durability and health. Whether in periods of party uncertainty or stability, both the Parade and the Rally function as dual engines of legitimation — the NDP harnesses the annual surge of emotional resonance to subtly reinforce narratives of PAP hegemonic continuity, while the NDR serves as the rational counterpart, delivering calculated policy pronouncements and an official narrative of successful governance.

Additionally, this project affirmatively answers the hypothesis posited in Chapter 3 that specific forms of legitimacy claims mobilised each year cannot be divorced from the contexts in which they emerge. This temporal variation in legitimacy claims reveal much about the PAP's reflexivity, whereby legitimacy is not asserted in a vacuum and in an over-the-top manner, but rather is tactically recalibrated, deployed, and then scaled back in accordance to the regime's immediate and long-term imperatives. However, it is important to note that the project has identified conscious efforts of politicisation- a proactive building of a 'reservoir'<sup>3</sup> of legitimacy especially during periods of stability. This 'reservoir' acts as a critical stockpile that the PAP has proven to draw on in the emergence of threats to the regime. This steady and accumulative layering of legitimacy claims across the decade makes sense with the ethos underpinning Lukes' theory on power, which pays attention to arguably the most potent dimension of entrenched authority relating to power - political actors stay in power for long not because of short-term force or coercion but operates artfully behind-the-scenes by shaping perceptions gradually, preemptively framing the bounds of reality, and forestalling any pushback against the political entity in question over an extended period of time - precisely what the dissertation has identified as the unsaid function of these state-orchestrated spectacles.

As Gramsci would see it, the PAP does not ride on the coattails of its entrenched incumbency, but continuously supercharges its hegemony via an intentional cultivation of public consent and crafting an aura of inevitability by framing of the PAP as indistinguishable from the nation itself. This dissertation ends on a rather ruminative note that crystallises the unique paradox of patriotism in Singapore- to celebrate and glorify the nation, as a matter of course, is to revere the ruling party PAP. As such, ostensibly neutral or apolitical gestures of unadulterated patriotism places a finger on the pulse of the heart of an enduring PAP legitimation project. By championing the nation, PAP champions itself- by engendering national pride, PAP entrenches its own exigency. This dissertation invigorates greater conversation on Singapore's political landscape by presenting a novel perspective of something simmering at the surface but still remains largely unarticulated by the general public or academics - it is

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to the literature review in Chapter 1.4. ,on page 9 for more on this legitimacy 'reservoir'.

precisely the neat and unquestioned folding-in of of the party within the celebration of nationhood that contributes in explaining PAP's remarkable regime resilience over the past 6 decades from 1965 to 2025.

### Implications of Findings

With the above analysis in mind, readers are presented with decisive evidence across the case studies, offering a relatively **recent study on adaptive legitimization in practice**. Across case studies over the span of a decade, this project shows how legitimization strategies shift in response to diminished credibility or tangible threats to party condition, offering a rare window into authoritarian resilience in non-coercive, performative forms.

Most importantly, this dissertation is able to cater to the everyday reader, on top of scholars of regime legitimization and political communication in party strategy, contributing to the realm by **going beyond the oft-cited examples of brute violence or overt propaganda**, to better provide empirical insight into the myriad ways in which dominant parties could be enforcing ideological hegemony through much subtler or softer cultural ways. This project shifts the analytical spotlight away from election results, policy output, or elite discourse alone, toward the realm of symbolic governance—showing that national rituals and state events are not peripheral to politics, but central to it.

Readers are also embellished with a practical analytical apparatus—the Regime Legitimation Framework—to identify legitimacy claims and decode how spectacle and speeches can naturalise authority. The **conceptual utility of blending Weber, Gramsci, and Lukes** has proven fruitful in understanding not just how legitimacy is performed and safeguarded, but how it is seamlessly folded into state events. Readers walk away with a more elastic understanding of legitimization as dynamic and responsive claims that can be made in seemingly neutral or apolitical arenas, far away from the confines of explicitly politicised arenas such as that of parliament. For those interested in understanding the underpinnings of **authoritarian resilience**, this study shows that even highly institutionalised regimes do not take legitimacy for granted. Instead, they build a 'reservoir' of political capital during times of stability and tactically draw on it in moments of crisis—a worthy intellectual tidbit that has significant explanatory powers to account for reasons undergirding the long-term durability of dominant-party regimes across the globe.

Interestingly, this project finds that it has been able to shed light on a rarely raised **intersection** in Singapore's political discourse- PAP's success in fusing national identity so seamlessly with party identity can be argued to be the PAP's strongest achievement. The final, zoomed-out analysis across all three case studies illuminates the **complex relationship between two major concepts** of political legitimacy as well as national identity, and the reader is equipped with a fresh perspective to critically examine this fusion that could be occurring in other contexts as well. In Singapore, to love the nation is often, by design, to love the PAP. This subtle yet profound insight invites readers to reconsider how power operates not just through policy or force, but through targeted design, made palatable and acceptable to the average citizen by performance, narrative, and national sentiment.

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