

Singapore's People's Association

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Countering city insurgency: a case study in urban nation-building.

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The outbreak of insurgency in many parts of the world has already made a marked imprint on mid-twentieth century history. Concern over the relationship of our national interests to insurgent movements has led to a widespread and continuing involvement of many elements of our government in countering insurgencies. Underlying this involvement is the stubborn fact that insurgency is basically a political problem, a fact frequently obscured by the commitment of military and paramilitary forces in efforts to counter insurgent movements.

Mao Tse-t'ung's theory that a rural-based movement can gradually isolate and choke urban centers into submission has exerted considerable influence on our own counterinsurgency concepts. Although the theory offers ways to shape insurgency in the countryside, it recognizes the urban centers as the ultimate targets. In the face of Mao's theory, and abetted by the worldwide population shift to urban centers, agencies of our government have become increasingly interested in finding means to counter insurgent activity in the cities.

Mother Necessity

Singapore offers a unique case history of counterinsurgency in an urban setting, where the leadership early recognized the problem in its political form and developed programs of a political nature with which to stunt insurgent growth. In this happy situation there was no requirement for direct American participation, but an opportunity was offered to learn lessons which can and should be applied elsewhere.

Singapore is a city without a countryside, with more than two million people packed into an urban area not much larger than Richmond, Va. In this environment social problems multiply. It came as no surprise when the large pro-Communist left wing of the ruling People's Action Party split off in 1961 to form an opposition whose purpose it was to exploit these multiplying problems. As a consequence, there emerged two parties with almost equal strength in the legislature and an almost equal call on the loyalties of the people.

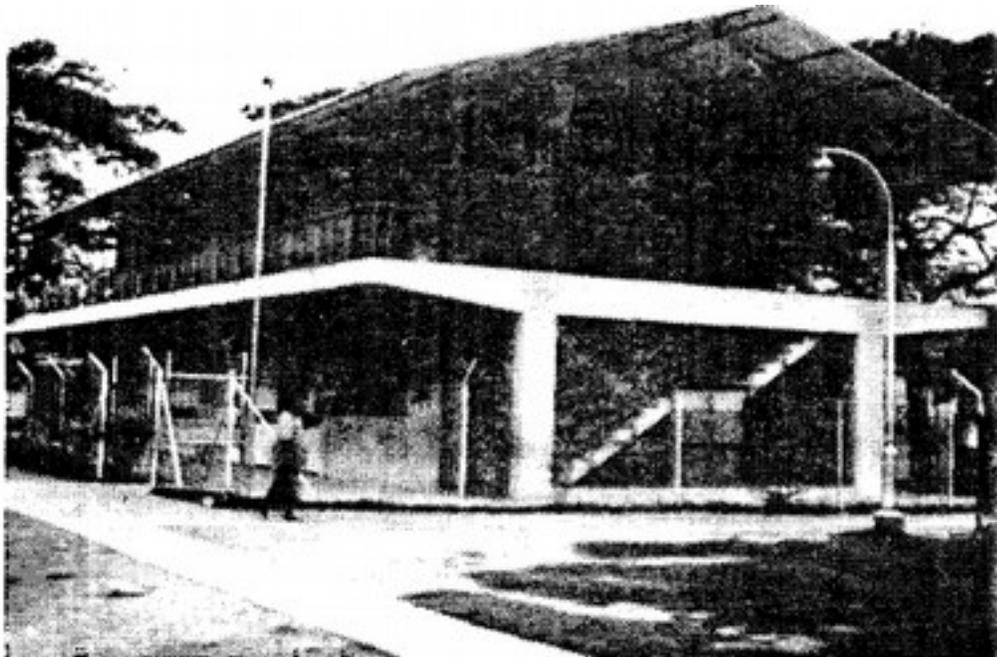
When PAP leaders surveyed their shrunken mandate after the split, they decided to meet the crisis head on with a nation-building program designed to wean pro-Communist voters away from the opposition. Their plan was unique in several ways. First, it was wholly an Asian creation and at no time depended to an important degree on idea, or resources from outside. Second, the program aimed at two-way communication between government and ruling party at the top and the people below, and it aimed also to prove that the government could be responsive to the people's needs. Finally, the program deliberately confused the roles of government and party so that the people tended to praise the party for activities undertaken by the government, Funded by the government but exploited by the ruling party, it cultivated an image independent of both. Thus Singapore's unique People's Association was born.

The Community Centers

Focal point of the People's Association is the neighborhood community center. Today there are almost 200 of them scattered throughout the city on busy streets, on the ground floors of public housing projects, or

along a quiet road in the suburbs. Small centers typically have three rooms, larger ones up to six or seven, and nearly all have well-equipped playgrounds. There is office space for the center's small staff and for the committee of neighborhood leaders responsible for day-to-day management. Two other organizations also make their headquarters in the centers: a neighborhood vigilante organization, and the local political committee. Though center construction is not luxurious, plain cement walls, and fluorescent lights are more than adequate if the activities inside can be made to measure up.

One important activity carried on by the centers is the supply of information. From the start, the quest for ways to get the party's message to the people led planners to look on the centers as a useful channel for disseminating information. Except for the party newspaper, considered too partisan even for the People's Association, political publications soon found their way into every center. Published by the government, their message blurred distinctions between government and party while conferring approval on both. One weekly publication will carry laudatory statements about the government, another photographs of political leaders opening new schools and housing projects. Speeches made on these occasions are also readily available in mimeographed form. Government-produced news and editorial programs are always available on the center's one or more television sets.



A Typical Community Center.

Athletics is another important center activity. Usually the playground is equipped for basketball and volleyball, and an inside room has facilities for ping pong, wrestling, and body building. Wherever the staff has the energy and drive, considerable effort goes into using these facilities to draw the young people of the neighborhood into the center's orbit. Often this is readily achieved, especially if no other playground is available. The People's Association, moreover, is always prepared to assign qualified athletic instructors on a temporary basis.

In addition, there is a wide range of educational activity carried out at the centers under the supervision of professional instructors. Most centers offer practical instruction for adults in such subjects as reading, languages, sewing, typing, weaving, and painting. There are kindergartens for the children established both as a supplement to the regular educational system and as an answer to the opposition party, which has opened a number of kindergartens of its own.



Kindergarten in a Community Center.

Quite apart from informational, athletic, and educational activities, most

of which are "loss leaders" designed to expand neighborhood participation, the centers are also at the heart of grass-roots political activity in the neighborhood. Thus when an elected PAP representative is looking for a platform from which to cajole, praise, or inform his constituents, he usually chooses a community center as an auditorium or arranges a party-sponsored dinner there. Either way the roles of community center, government, and party become inextricably entwined. But since the center theoretically should not play host to a purely political activity, the neighborhood political committee often becomes the sponsor.

Neighborhood Political Committees

It was partly the need for sponsorship of political activity in the centers and partly also Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's need for a personal political organization which led to the creation of political committees throughout the city in 1964. Like so many other organizations touching on the People's Association complex, the committees pretend not to be political organizations at all. In each electoral district the members of the committee are appointed by the elected PAP representative. All appointments are then reviewed by the Prime Minister's office, and the appointees thus consider themselves to be partially responsible to the Prime Minister himself.

The duties of committee members suggest a cross between ward heeler, opinion sampler, and local leader, with a little of the neighborhood cop thrown in for good measure. Thus the committee acts as eyes, ears, and sounding board for the elected representative. Further, it acts as the intermediary through which the representative dispenses patronage and favors. Complaints against the government filter up; remedies decided upon by the party percolate down. In nurturing two-way communication with the people, the political committees indeed play a primary role. Nor has Prime Minister Lee failed to note the committees' usefulness in this sense. Hardly a week passes without his requesting an opinion or assessment from the almost 200 active committees throughout the city. How will your neighborhood react to this policy or that initiative?

Whether the committees function as a private intelligence system, as

groupings of well-intentioned neighborhood leaders, or as thinky disguised political organizations, their respectability is undeniably enhanced by close identification with the "non-political" community centers. IN this they are infinitely more acceptable than the PAP's local branch offices. Perhaps the one clear point in the confusion is that they are partly responsible to the Prime Minister. His understanding of neighborhood attitudes is accordingly more accurate, his ability to act quickly enhanced.

Management Committees

Not all the requirements of the community center are satisfied by the political committee, which has neither authority nor capacity to cope with daily administrative chores, financial needs, or policy matters. In each center there is a management committee with authority over daily operations. These committees are made up of local citizens who volunteer their time and resources for the good of the neighborhood. As counterweight to the political committee, the management committees are appointed by the People's Association and have less relation to politics or the party in power. Their primary task is to make the center run effectively. So long as the committee has an energetic chairman and is composed of capable neighborhood leaders, the center usually functions smoothly, its professional staff receiving from the committee most of the guidance and direction that is needed. More important, committee members often become advocates of the PAP. Since their roots run deep into the neighborhood communities, they provide control and two-way communication into the very heart of the city.



Management Committee Gives Dinner for Neighborhood Leaders.

Community Center Stag

Past efforts to operate centers with inadequately trained personnel often led to a low level of use by people in the neighborhood. Because the People's Association has wanted to avoid restricting, compelling, or formalizing use of the centers, there has never been provision for membership in a center or other formal association. This in turn has made the caliber of the staff an indispensable element in encouraging use of the center. In the beginning there was no alternative to employing untrained personnel, but increasingly these early recruits are either receiving professional training at a special institute or, if they are not judged competent, being replaced altogether by the institute's graduates.

The staff, it can be seen, serves two masters, who do not necessarily hold identical views on how the job should be done. The management committee directs daily operations, but the People's Association headquarters, a centralized bureaucracy acting as an umbrella for

People's Association activities, provides overall guidance and policy. The one responds to purely local needs, the other to the broader requirements of all 200 centers. Somewhere between, taking direction from one, but bureaucratically responsible to the other, is the staff. Compounding the problem is the certain fact that the comparatively young staff must cope with the natural reluctance of management committees composed mostly of people in their forties and fifties to respond to new suggestions. Staff members often avoid the problem by concerning themselves with purely administrative aspects of the center's operation. They schedule athletic events, arrange for vocational classes, see to the routine distribution of government publications and newspapers, and avoid becoming involved in matters of policy. But the most efficient centers are always those run by a forceful and capable staff.

People's Association Headquarters

The staff's other master, the People's Association headquarters, is the more powerful but less effective. Now that enough centers have been built and the program is well on the tracks, a number of its more vigorous headquarters officials have been replaced. There has been a consequent atrophying of the bureaucracy, which no longer has either the sense of mission or the drive that was once its hallmark.

The basic headquarters organization is divided between general administration and direct supervision of the centers, with a deputy director for each function. The administrative deputy director subdivides his duties into functions, such as publications, budget, maintenance, educational programs, physical education, and women's activities. The operational deputy director supervises the centers through subordinates. Over both deputies is a director who answers to the Board of Directors of the People's Association, composed mostly of PAP ministers and supporters. Thus the public-private character of the People's Association is perpetuated.

Government Services

More than one Singaporean, drawn into daily use of his neighborhood center, is unable to tell whether he owes its presence to the ruling party, the government, or the private sector. This ambiguity is precisely what the PAP wants. To enhance the effect, moreover, the party sees to it that all possible services are dispensed by the government on the premises of the centers, so that the identification of the center with government as well as party is immeasurably increased. The reputation for responsive government thus acquired is excellent insurance against an occasional unfortunate policy or unpopular decision.

Perhaps the most important of the services dispensed through the centers is the weekly welfare payment which enables many unemployed families to lead a comparatively decent life. Another is health services, whether TB X-ray trucks, mobile dental clinics, birth control units, or dispensaries. Yet another is the neighborhood vigilante organization, a paramilitary group backed and funded by the government and trained to supplement the police by providing all-night coverage at the block level.

Agricultural extension services are dispensed from rural centers; all centers offer newspapers, government publications, and books; and announcements of forthcoming improvements in neighborhood services are made from whichever center is closest. If in need of a job, the best place to apply is at the office of the political committee in the center; if bothered by vandalism in the neighborhood, the vigilante organization offers satisfaction; and if you want to watch television. but do not have a set, the community center offers one. Thus the people of the neighborhood look on the center as the chief point of contact between themselves and the government, and the ruling party reaps the benefits.



X-Ray Truck at a Community Center.

Effectiveness

Though the People's Association complex has weaknesses, its total impact has been decisive in promoting responsive government and two-way communication with the people. Furthermore, it has played a major role in reducing to manageable proportions the threat from the pro-Communist opposition. Certainly the community center is an institution of major significance in Singapore, where it offers effective grass-roots public administration and political contact.

A primary reason for the center's acceptance in Singapore neighborhoods is that sound, honest public administration at the local level has enabled the government to deliver on promises made by the political leadership. Without that indispensable responsiveness, it is doubtful whether the complex could be made to work. Thus the mobile clinics do arrive at the appointed hour; the political committee willingly transmits neighborhood grievances to the government and seeks satisfaction; and welfare payments are made on time without the imposed "commission" once customary in Singapore.

In the light of the enormous task which faced the PAP in 1961, its achievements have been extremely impressive ones. The main problem then was to encourage responsive government and communication with the people. This problem has been solved. What remains to be done is the refinement of techniques and programs which have already been established. It is difficult to think of other urban areas in either the developing or the developed world which could not profit from this unique example.

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