Interrogating the Limits of Welfare Reforms in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

As population demographics change and economic crises spread and deepen, welfare reform has become an urgent problem in many developed countries. As elsewhere in East Asia, the state in Singapore has in recent years stepped up its efforts to deal with issues of healthcare, education, support for care, retirement and even unemployment. Much of this has been in response to demographic shifts, economic trends and, importantly, political pressures. This article evaluates the possibilities and limits of recent reforms. It looks at some promising aspects of reform, such as increases in spending in certain areas, before examining the limitations of the reforms. These include the fact that most resources have been directed toward supporting businesses, while increases in direct spending on citizens have been limited and conditional rather than universal; furthermore, little or no attention has been paid to the issue of women’s underemployment. These features suggest constraints within the logic and principles of welfare, which continue to define citizens as having limited rights and entitlements, and citizenship as entailing regular employment and heavy obligations toward the family. The analysis of reforms sheds light on how the appearance of expansion can mask continuing limitations. The case of Singapore illustrates the importance of looking not just at expenditure but also at the principles and logics in which welfare reforms are embedded, in a variety of national contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In the global context of periodic economic crises and demographic shifts, state spending on social welfare — healthcare, education, support for the care of dependants, unemployment and retirement support — are intensely debated in many industrialized countries. In places like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, which have not historically had strong welfare state regimes, rapidly ageing populations as well as economic slowdowns have meant that the need for and pressure toward social spending have...
intensified. As scholars debate the welfare regime changes taking place and the conditions enabling them, much attention has been paid to the changes in levels of social spending and the direct effects these have had on specific groups of people within a country. As Jenson and Sineau (2003) point out, however, changes in programme design and the social philosophies that underpin them are also shifting globally; this is important insofar as ‘the direction and forms of spending are what counts; they can remake citizenship regimes’ (ibid.: 6). In other words, what it means to be a citizen — the rights, responsibilities and obligations entailed — is also shifting.

Taking the case of Singapore, I similarly argue that it is crucial for ongoing scholarly and public debates in Asia to include discussions about citizenship regimes as reforms proceed. Welfare regime changes have an impact not only on (tangible and measurable) income inequalities but also on less tangible but equally important issues around how citizens and citizenship are defined and experienced. In particular, where there appears to be welfare expansion in countries that have no history of concerted building of welfare state regimes, these ‘expansions’ must be scrutinized closely.

What are the ostensible goals of welfare reforms and how are they operationalized? How effective are they? What sorts of unintended consequences accompany them? This article shows that the Singapore state’s claims of increased attention to spending and redistribution, to ‘equality’ and ‘social inclusion’ are limited in three ways: a strong orientation toward subsidizing companies; modest and conditional direct aid to low-income households; and a consistent and persistent neglect of the gendered inequalities in both care and wage work. As the problems of increased inequalities and diminished social mobility continue to be discussed by the public, by scholars and by state officials, we must critically evaluate whether reforms are indeed accompanied by significant shifts in underlying principles and logic; in doing so, we also interrogate the ways in which reforms may be self-defeating.

This article proceeds as follows. The following section briefly sketches the context of welfare reform in East Asia, and outlines some key questions. What models of welfare regime are employed in the region and what underlying principles drive welfare reform? Have the changes in welfare regimes had a real impact on issues of citizenship and social exclusion? The subsequent sections then focus on the case of Singapore, presenting some key tenets of the state’s position on welfare, and examining in more detail the recent welfare reforms. Particular attention is given to women’s paid and unpaid labour in Singapore, and the ways that certain patterns are (re)produced by state policies. In assessing the reform measures, two questions arise: will the reforms ensure sustained higher income, and will they lead to greater ‘social inclusion’? For the latter question, a wider focus is needed, to look more broadly at the underlying principles and latent effects of the reforms.

In focusing on the principles and logics of welfare reform, this article aims to contribute to ongoing debates in Singapore and elsewhere as states and societies struggle to address intensifying needs. While much attention has
been given to spending levels and direct effects, I argue that it is crucial to understand how ‘expansions’ in reform can be accompanied by persistent assumptions that naturalize and reproduce limited visions of citizenship. These assumptions limit the efficacy of reforms in truly achieving short- and long-term goals of improving people’s well-being and achieving greater equality.

EXAMINING WELFARE REFORM

Scholars have looked at welfare reform in a variety of national contexts, not least because the sustainability of systems is at stake. In East Asia, rapidly ageing populations, low fertility rates and altered economic conditions have pushed governments in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore to respond to the inadequacy of systems that have historically relied on people acquiring support through employers as well as through families (Aspalter, 2006; Croissant, 2004).

Studies on these cases have focused on two main empirical questions: (1) what sort of model or type characterizes a given case, and which of these have seen transformation?; and (2) what are the driving forces that bring about and/or shape welfare reform? In addressing these questions, scholars have shown that significant transformations have occurred in some but not all of the East Asian cases. While South Korea and Taiwan have seen certain expansions (Kwon, 2005), social spending in Singapore and Hong Kong remain rather limited (Lee, 2006; Wilding, 2008). Kwon and Holliday (2006) point out that despite reforms, the focus of the Korean state has remained that of enhancing industrial competitiveness and economic growth; it retains what they call a productivist social policy orientation. Nonetheless, as Peng and Wong (2008) argue, despite certain institutional/structural continuities, the specific purposes within institutions associated with the welfare state have shifted significantly, such that welfare regimes in Taiwan and South Korea have deepened.

These observations lead to the second question regarding the politics of reform: here, the importance of democratic pressures and the specific strategic actions of civil society activists are key (Kwon, 2003; Song, 2009). While all of the East Asian cases, including Singapore, face pressures of economic slowdown, ageing population structures and declining fertility, it is in countries where there is competitive pressure in electoral politics and where expanding civil society organizations have successfully put pressure on politicians — Japan, Taiwan, South Korea — that we have seen significant deepening and widening of welfare provisions (Peng and Wong, 2004).

A third empirical question is suggested through this work but has not been thoroughly pursued: what have been the effects and consequences of transformations in welfare regimes for the well-being of citizens and for the meanings and parameters of citizenship? This question has been raised
with regard to welfare reform in the US, but has received less attention in East Asia, perhaps partly because it may be too soon to evaluate recent developments. In response to intensifying public debates around inequality and social mobility, state officials in Singapore have argued that expansion of certain programmes has helped to significantly increase the incomes of low-income households and has thereby reduced income inequality (Oon, 2010; Shanmugaratnam, 2012). Critics, however, have contended that those on low incomes are suffering more and that income inequality has worsened in recent years (Bhaskaran et al., 2012; Ishita, 2008). In general, when examining the impact on citizens, the dominant wisdom is to look to quantifiable effects and numerical indicators. While such indicators are indispensable, this approach is only part of the story, and does not recognize a crucial aspect of welfare reform: that what is at stake goes beyond issues of expenditure and the straightforward fulfilment of needs.

Welfare policies, as feminist scholars have shown, articulate and define needs and deservedness (Fraser, 1994; Haney, 2002; O’Connor et al., 1999). They both represent and reproduce norms and values of a society (Hays, 2003) and are a crucial site of governance (Song, 2010; Teo, forthcoming). Welfare reforms embed within them specific assumptions about individuals, families, society and polity, and have effects on how each of these is experienced and conceptualized (Daly, 2011). Crucially, the conceptualization and implementation of welfare regimes define and limit citizens’ sense of their relationship to the state and to others in society (Bashevkin, 2002; Lister, 2009; Orloff, 1993; Somers, 2008).

It is crucial, therefore, to examine not just how much is spent, absolutely and relatively, but also how spending is oriented and the principles around which reforms are designed. Thus, in tandem with evaluating the immediate effects of specific transfers and programmes, we need to pay close attention to how reforms do and do not disrupt fundamental principles. It follows that we should also ask whether, in holding on to certain principles, reforms can really claim to do what they say they will do. The appearance of expansion can mask important limitations and constraints on citizens. Before turning to a discussion of recent reforms in Singapore, I outline some key tenets of the state’s position on the question of ‘welfare’ as well as the context framing recent reforms.

SINGAPORE: KEY TENETS OF THE ANTI-WELFARE STATE

Three approaches are repeatedly stressed when government officials in Singapore discuss the state’s social policies: (1) fostering self-reliant individuals; (2) ‘family as the first line of support’; and (3) ‘many helping hands’ (Balakrishnan, 2005, 2010; Tarmugi, 1995; Yu-Foo, 2005).

The first refers to the state’s view that an over-sized welfare state would engender dependence and its insistence that Singapore needs to ‘avoid
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entrenching an entitlement mentality, help people break out of a downward spiral of apathy and self-defeat and give them hope for the future’ (Balakrishnan, 2010). In this context, the notion of self-reliance refers primarily to the capacity to generate sufficient income through formal employment to cover a person’s needs for healthcare, support for children’s education, housing and other subsistence needs. The second approach — ‘family as the first line of support’ — reflects the state’s belief that, as an Asian society, Singaporeans value family ties and family values more than their Western counterparts; this renders Singapore distinct and indeed superior to Western countries in which welfare states have weakened the mutual dependence of family members. ¹ Finally, the ‘many helping hands’ approach embodies the state’s position that welfare support cannot be primarily the state’s responsibility; instead it wants to forge ‘a partnership with concerned citizens, corporations, community organisations, religious groups and family members to build a supportive, caring and compassionate society. The responsibility of helping the disadvantaged falls on each and every one. The successful and able are encouraged to help the disadvantaged’ (Tarmugi, 1995). These principles are embedded in and implemented through various state institutions.

An important component of the state’s interventions to construct ‘self-reliance’ lies in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) system. The CPF is a mandatory savings system wherein a proportion of an individual’s income from formal employment is deposited into his or her individual account on a monthly basis, with matching contributions from the employer. This fund is meant to satisfy some key needs for individual Singaporeans: public housing (in which more than 80 per cent of Singaporeans live); healthcare (with savings and insurance components); and retirement. Although it belongs to the individual, each account is strictly regulated in terms of amounts of contribution and usage. For example, while adult children are allowed to contribute cash to their parents’ accounts, and husbands to (non-working) wives’ accounts, transfers between accounts are not generally permitted. There are neither intergenerational transfers nor redistribution effects at the societal level.

The CPF is central to the state’s vision of ensuring that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own housing, healthcare and retirement needs. Individual CPFs accumulate through sustained employment. However, the adequacy of CPF in actually fulfilling people’s needs has come under serious question in recent years (Bhaskaran et al., 2012; Hui, 2012; Ishita, 2008; Lee, 1998; Mehta, 2006; Ng, 2013). In particular, some have pointed out the class, ethno-racial and gender inequalities that are inherent in a system premised on individuals maintaining continuous employment and generating enough income and savings for their individual needs in the long term.

¹ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong referred to this in a Chinese New Year message, for example (Lee, 2007).
(Association of Women for Action and Research, 2012; Lee, 2001). Indeed, from a feminist perspective and in the context of issues of inequality, it is clear that the doctrine of self-reliance depends on women’s unpaid and unrecognized labour within the domestic sphere.

The principles that underlie the Singapore state’s approach toward issues of welfare thus emphasize the importance of self-reliance through formal employment; reliance on family members before non-family members; the significant role of non-governmental organizations known as Voluntary Welfare Organizations; and the state as supporter of last resort. This emphasis on individual responsibility finds contemporary resonances in other countries, particularly in liberal regimes like the United States and Great Britain (Bashevkin, 2002; Hays, 2003).

The Singapore state can be conceptualized as a limited welfare state. Although highly interventionist in shaping national economic strategies and in managing housing, education, welfare, healthcare, public transportation, retirement funds and even care-giving practices in the so-called private sphere, social spending as a proportion of gross domestic product has been relatively low. Compared to countries in the OECD and EU which, according to Peng and Wong (2010), spent an average of 20.5 per cent and 27 per cent of their GDP, respectively, on financing welfare and social security in the mid-2000s, state spending on these programmes is significantly lower in East Asia. In the same period, Japan spent 18.6 per cent of GDP, Taiwan and Hong Kong close to 10 per cent, and China, Korea and Singapore less than 7 per cent (Peng and Wong, 2010: 657). This low level of spending has come under significant scrutiny and challenge in the past few years.

The rising costs of living in the city-state, coupled with a rapid growth in population, primarily due to immigration, have led to discontent amongst the general populace over what they see as inadequate government interventions on behalf of citizens. A palpable and intensifying sense of inequality between the haves and have-nots, and a feeling that ‘the Singapore dream’ — premised on meritocracy and social mobility — is eroding, have brought this discontent to the surface. Criticism of the government (dominated since

2. These figures may be underestimations insofar as they do not necessarily include things like public housing, which is very important in Singapore. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that social spending in Singapore specifically and East Asia more generally is far lower than in Western Europe.

3. The total population grew by more than 20 per cent within ten years, from 4 million in 2000 to 5.1 million in 2010. The population of Singapore is made up of ‘Residents’ — citizens and permanent residents — and ‘Non-Residents’, who have various types of permits as employees or dependants of employees. Much of the population growth is due to increases in the numbers of migrants, both temporary workers and people who take up permanent residence. Between 2000 and 2010, the Non-Resident population grew from 754,500 to 1.31 million, i.e. from 19 per cent to 26 per cent of the total population. The pattern is even more dramatic if we take a longer time span: in the two decades from 1990 to 2010, the Non-Resident population grew from 10 per cent to 26 per cent of the total population, and the number of Permanent Residents more than quadrupled, from 112,100 to 541,000.
the 1960s by the People’s Action Party) has taken the form of letters and op-eds in local newspapers, public forums, speeches, articles and blogs. In response, government officials have explicitly taken on inequality and social mobility in their public statements, and reforms in recent years have signalled the state’s recognition that more efforts are needed to address Singaporeans’ needs for housing, education, healthcare and retirement. I will now examine these reforms in more detail.

**WELFARE REFORM VIA LABOUR MARKET INTERVENTIONS: ENHANCING INCLUSION OR PERPETUATING EXCLUSIONS?**

To tackle the problem of widening income inequalities and thereby ensure ‘social inclusion’, the Singapore state has taken a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, central to the national budget plans in recent years is the goal of preventing job loss, particularly among older and lower-wage Singaporeans. On the other hand, some funds have been directed toward increasing the incomes of very low-income households in general, and the wages of low-income employees in particular. To these ends, two major sets of measures have been deployed: first, the state has subsidized companies which hire or retain older or low-wage workers and which send their workers for training, ostensibly to encourage the employment and retention of older and low-wage workers. Second, they have introduced a Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) to increase the income of low-wage workers as well as a number of other subsidies to benefit very low-income households.

Two questions then arise: will the measures achieve what they say they will achieve — sustained employment plus higher wages? And, perhaps more importantly, will these measures reduce inequality and enhance ‘social inclusion’? Before directly addressing these questions, three features of the recent measures need to be explored. First, most of the attention and resources have been directed toward supporting businesses; second, increases in direct spending on citizens have been limited and conditional on specific behaviours, rather than universal; and finally, little attention has been paid to the issue of women’s underemployment. I argue that these features suggest limited transformation in the logic and principles of welfare; citizens continue to be defined as having limited rights and entitlements, and citizenship is still seen as entailing employment and heavy — and indeed heavily gendered — obligations towards the family.

**Labour Market Interventions: Generous Subsidies for Companies**

In 2009, amidst the global financial crisis, the Singapore government announced a Budget that focused on key initiatives to prevent job losses. Totalling S$ 20.5 billion (about US$ 16 billion), the Budget included
projection of an unusually large deficit and involved the rare move of mobilizing S$ 4.9 billion from the national reserves (Shanmugaratnam, 2009; Zakir, 2009). Dubbed the ‘Resilience Package’, the sheer size of the Budget signalled an intensification of the state’s direct interventions in protecting jobs and assisting low-income Singaporean families. Many of the programmes and schemes announced in 2009 have been deepened and expanded in the years since.

In a context of ‘grave economic crisis’, a Jobs Credit Scheme was introduced (Shanmugaratnam, 2009). For six quarters beginning in March 2009, employers were given cash grants to offset individual workers’ wages (Ministry of Finance, 2010). To support businesses, the state announced in the same year a Special Risk-Sharing Initiative to stimulate bank lending by taking on ‘risk-sharing’ with banks. It also announced a significant series of tax reductions and simplifications for businesses when they applied for various schemes. To incentivize companies to retain workers as well as to make older and lower-paid Singaporeans cheaper to employ, a Special Employment Credit was announced in 2012 to offset (for employers) the wages of Singaporean workers above fifty years old who earn S$ 3,000–4,000 a month (Shanmugaratnam, 2012). In 2013, to boost wages for low-paid workers, a further Wage Credit Scheme was introduced, at a projected cost of S$ 3.6 billion over three years, in which ‘the government will co-fund 40% of wage increases for Singapore employees over the next 3 years’ (Shanmugaratnam, 2013: 24).

As well as subsidizing employers with the goal of protecting jobs, the state also directed some resources towards improving productivity via training programmes. The Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience took the form of a S$ 750 million pledge over two years to promote training by subsidizing course fees and absentee payroll (Shanmugaratnam, 2009). The Workfare Training Scheme, more specifically targeted at low-wage workers and intended to complement the Workfare Income Supplement, was introduced in 2010 to pay for course fees, absentee payroll and cash bonuses to workers. Through the National Productivity Fund (with commitments of S$ 1 billion per year in 2010 and 2011), the Productivity and Innovation Credit (a commitment of at least S$ 250 million per year from 2010 to 2015), and the Continuing Education and Training Masterplan (S$ 30 million per year), the state directs subsidies to individuals, offers tax relief to companies that send their workers for training, and is investing in building the necessary institutional infrastructure for training and accreditation programmes (Ministry of Manpower, 2012a; Shanmugaratnam, 2011).

**Labour Market Interventions: Conditional Aid for Low-income Households**

Simultaneously with the channelling of these moneys and programmes towards companies, some resources have been channelled directly to
supplement low-paid workers’ wages. Though significant, the amounts committed are notably smaller than the funds aimed at subsidizing companies; moreover, as Hui (2011) argues, the income subsidies still effectively act as subsidies for employers who can continue to rely on these wage supplements rather than increase productivity. Additionally, in contrast to the many efforts to simplify processes for companies to take advantage of various schemes, the schemes directed at workers come with numerous and strict preconditions and criteria to prevent the ‘moral hazards’ of laziness and dependence.

As noted above, the WIS was established in 2007 to increase the income of low-wage workers. Various changes have been made to this scheme since its inception. In 2013 and 2014, workers above thirty-five years old who earn less than S$ 1,900 per month, and who have been employed for at least two months in a given three-month period, qualify for WIS (Central Provident Fund Board, 2013). The amount depends on a confluence of factors including age, income, the value of the worker’s residential property, and whether the worker is in wage-work or self-employed. The WIS ranges from S$ 933 to S$ 3,500 per year (or S$ 77.75 to S$ 291 per month); for employees, 40 per cent of this is in cash and 60 per cent in CPF contributions, while for the self-employed, 90 per cent is in the form of CPF contributions (Ministry of Manpower et al., 2014). The WIS is one of the most sustained forms of support given to low-income and older workers in Singapore. In 2013, about 480,000 workers (30 per cent of the citizen workforce) were eligible to receive the WIS, and S$ 650 million was committed to it (Shanmugaratnam, 2013).

Aside from the WIS, the past few years have seen increased attention to aiding the poor. Permanent Public Assistance continues to be reserved for people who are unable to work (due to old age and/or disabilities) and have no family support, but under the rubric of the ComCare Endowment Fund set up in 2005, low-income Singaporeans can apply for temporary cash and food aid, help in securing work, and subsidies for childcare, kindergarten and after-school care (Ministry of Community Development, 2005). To qualify for direct ‘short-to-medium term’ aid from the ComCare fund, income cannot exceed S$ 1,900 per month per household or S$ 650 per household member (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2014). Childcare subsidies vary depending on income: the lowest 20 per cent in terms of household income receive significant subsidies amounting to 90 per cent or more of fees (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2013).

In all the recent annual Budget speeches, workers and jobs are repeatedly mentioned (Shanmugaratnam, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). As outlined above, many schemes have been put in place with the goal of helping Singaporeans to keep their jobs as well as to improve their productivity via training. Significantly, while framed as helping Singaporean workers, the bulk of budgeted funds are channelled toward businesses. The 2009 Resilience Package of S$ 20.5 billion, for example, was broken down as
follows: (a) S$ 5.1 billion to preserve jobs, including a S$4.5 billion Jobs Credit Scheme for employers to offset their hiring costs; (b) S$ 5.8 billion in government capital under the Special Risk-Sharing Initiative to stimulate bank lending to businesses; (c) S$ 2.6 billion in tax measures and grants for businesses to ‘enhance business cash-flow and competitiveness’; (d) S$ 2.6 billion in assistance to households in the form of various tax rebates, utilities and rental rebates, and vouchers, as well as some direct financial aid for the very low-income and students; (e) S$ 4.4 billion for building of infrastructure in transportation, education and healthcare (Ministry of Finance, 2013).

Thus, although important moves have been made to directly assist those on low incomes, the majority of measures have been targeted at subsidizing companies. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the generous ways in which moneys are channelled into all types of companies, with little discrimination, the funds available to the low-income are accompanied by strict criteria and processes designed to prevent ‘dependence’. The multiple schemes directed toward aid and redistribution, impressive as they are in scope and complexity, are still modest in terms of spending, particularly relative to what is spent to support businesses.

The explicit rationale for this policy approach is presented as follows: first, economic growth ensures the production of sustainable wealth that in turn ensures good lives; second, and importantly, the loss of jobs and self-reliance is morally hazardous. Speaking about the importance of building a socially cohesive society in the 2011 Budget speech, Minister of Finance, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, stated:

We cannot leave social cohesion purely to market forces. Left to the market, incomes will continue to diverge, and opportunities too will diverge. This is happening around the world, in almost every society that is integrated into global markets. That is why the Government has intervened significantly in Singapore to tilt benefits in favour of those lower down the income ladder. But we must avoid the mistakes of the developed countries which have built up unsustainable systems of entitlements — in healthcare, unemployment insurance and pensions. These have not only meant high taxes today, but huge debts and unfunded government liabilities which can no longer be postponed. Worse, the over-generous social entitlements have progressively reduced the work ethic over time. Some of these developed countries are now undertaking painful reforms to gradually recover their economic dynamism. Our approach must therefore remain centred on opportunities, not entitlements. This is why we are focusing on helping the low-income group through education, employment and home ownership. (Shanmugaratnam, 2011, emphasis added)

The Minister reminded Singaporeans that there are global market forces beyond the state’s control and that the state is doing the best it can in the circumstances; this is a leitmotif in the Singapore state’s governance (Teo, 2011). He went on to assert that welfare states are doomed to failure, and that the Singapore state’s interventions are in fact better and more valuable,

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4. ‘Good’ primarily in the economic sense; however, there is some slippage in state rhetoric that implies that this is also the basis for other kinds of ‘good’, including morally good.
insofar as they enable people to help themselves. It is through this approach that the work ethic can be maintained.

This ‘support workers through supporting businesses’ approach, coupled with the assumption that overly generous benefits will lead to individuals’ abuse of the system, is delivered through institutionalized mechanisms. To aid businesses, the state provides ‘flexibility’ through various grants and forms of tax relief that help lower their costs: companies are given leeway in figuring out how best to use various moneys provided by government schemes; lowered taxes are accompanied by pledges to simplify processes and shorten waiting times so that companies can easily claim the promised benefits. While there are checks in place to ensure that companies fulfil certain criteria, there appears to be a high degree of trust that businesses will do the right thing when provided with flexibility and space to conduct businesses freely. This is striking when contrasted against the strict eligibility criteria, waiting times, and complex processes that accompany benefits offered to low-income individuals and households.

The WIS, for example, requires work to have been undertaken within given periods of time. In 2010, this was three months of work within a six-month period; in 2012, this was changed to two months of work within a three-month period (Central Provident Fund Board, 2012). Framed as an effort to shorten waiting times for financial support, this change makes it more important that workers maintain sustained employment. For those who find it difficult to stay employed — including people with dependants who need their care at home — this criterion can be hard to meet. The WIS, when applied to the self-employed, requires persons to contribute money to their CPF accounts. This indicates the state’s preference that increased income goes toward enhancing individuals’ savings.

Another example of benefits to the low-income being more tightly constrained (and constraining) than funds for businesses is in ComCare. To apply for ComCare funds, individuals are subjected to strict means tests, have to wait several weeks to be processed, and are then subject to regular and frequent reviews. Once accepted onto the programme, individuals can expect to be evaluated every three to six months. Social workers I spoke to made it clear that three months is rarely enough time for people to become economically ‘self-reliant’. Subsidies for childcare will be discussed in greater detail below. At this point, it is enough to note that subsidies for childcare centres and after-school care not only carry criteria relating to economic needs, but also the requirement for mothers to be employed.

The more permanent Public Assistance programme, which affects less than 3 per cent of resident households (Channel NewsAsia, 2012), most of whom are the destitute elderly or the permanently disabled, includes a clause that recipients do not have children whose household income exceeds S$ 1,700 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2013b). In contrast to the efforts at streamlining which make it increasingly straightforward for companies to access various funds — the Wage Credit Scheme is
automatically paid out to companies, for example — applicants for Public Assistance have to bring with them a long list of documents that reads like multiple layers of fraud prevention:

identity card, identity card(s) of family members within the same household; birth certificate(s) of children below 15 years old; marriage or divorce certificate; latest payslip(s); letter of appointment (employment); recent CPF statement of account(s) with last 15 months contribution and transaction history of household; all updated bank account passbook(s)/statement(s); medical appointment card(s); doctor’s memo certifying fitness for work, and duration of condition; latest Town Council statement; HDB [Housing and Development Board] Book (for rental flats); latest power supply bill; prison’s Visitor Card; documents on assistance received from other organization(s); any supporting documents. (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2013b)

In sum, low-income individuals come under a great deal of scrutiny for modest sums of money and are placed under extraordinarily tight constraints when accessing social benefits. Indeed, in ongoing interviews with low-income Singaporeans, respondents share their feelings of shame and indignity when describing these encounters; some hesitate or resist seeking help precisely because of these deeply intrusive and complex procedures.

Besides highlighting what recent reforms have focused on — incentivizing companies to retain older and/or less educated workers through subsidizing company payrolls as well as providing conditional aid to low-income households — it is important to point out gaps. One key gap is in addressing women’s roles as economic actors, both potential and latent. In what follows, I describe the context of women’s paid and unpaid labour in Singapore, and the ways certain patterns are (re)produced by state policies. I do this with the aim of deepening our view of how citizenship in Singapore is defined — both what it is and what it is not. If we think of social policies as defining the terms and meanings of belonging in a society, it is clear that citizenship in Singapore is defined strongly around obligations to be economically productive. There is little sense that certain basic material conditions are citizens’ rights. Maintaining this focus on the gaps, I also highlight the ways in which citizens — as individuals and families — are very much individualized units whose connections to and need for ‘the social’ are sometimes obscured and at other times severed. I will later consider how this might limit the goals of social inclusion and long-term societal well-being.

Gendered Labour: Constraining Women’s Choices

‘Self-reliance’ — a key aspect in the Singapore state’s approach toward social spending — has been defined as earning enough, earning consistently over the course of a working life, and saving throughout one’s ‘productive’ years. This must be done, not just for the individual, but also for the family, since family is the ‘first line of support’. That this ideal centres on the male breadwinner is barely concealed in government documents and official
speeches. The language of the Budget does not try to be gender neutral: the imagined worker is a man. For example, speaking about productivity in the Budget of 2010, Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam states: ‘we can only make our next leap in productivity and incomes if every individual takes the initiative to develop his skills and expertise, and accomplish more in his job and career’ (Shanmugaratnam, 2010: 11; emphasis added).

This male-specific language is used in numerous official statements, suggesting that men as workers are the default position and the basis for the imagined worker in policy making. When Shanmugaratnam, in the same speech, announced that the ‘wife relief’ for taxes was to be renamed ‘spouse relief’ and reorganized such that wives can claim husbands as dependants, he said: ‘This will help families where the wife is the breadwinner, for instance where the husband has retired’ (ibid.: 51, emphasis added). Even when policies change, then, to reflect that women might have male dependants, officials find it necessary to qualify that women are not really breadwinners, but that their husbands have simply retired before them.

The existence of this sort of ideal male worker — self-sufficient and continuously fully employed — requires someone else to be doing the work of social reproduction. Scholars have long pointed out that capitalism depends on women doing the invisible and uncompensated work of maintaining households and children (Glazer, 1984; Lamphere, 1986; Laslett and Brenner, 1989). In the Singapore case, we see that the combination of labour market conditions and public policy orientations toward care needs render it such that women, particularly less educated women, find it difficult to combine paid work with household responsibilities.

In the past few decades, women in Singapore have seen advancements in their social positions in important ways. They are generally increasingly well-educated; more are participating in the paid workforce and some are gradually gaining prominence in well-paid and well-respected careers. Yet, there are significant gender differences in wages as well as lifetime employment patterns. Women are still paid less than men in all occupational sectors, even when they receive the same level of education; they are over-represented at the lower end of the wage scale and under-represented at the higher end (Lim, 2011). Significantly for the purposes of this article, wage differentials between men and women are particularly pronounced among lower-wage blue-collar workers, ranging from 27 per cent for ‘craftsmen and related trade workers’, and 29 per cent for ‘cleaners, labourers and related workers’, to 43 per cent for ‘plant and machine operators’ (Ministry of Manpower, 2011).

The wage differentials between men and women also increase with age, partly because of differing patterns of employment over the life course (Ministry of Manpower, 2011). Although there is increasing parity in educational attainment between men and women, this does not translate into similar patterns in employment: women are well-represented in the workforce when they first leave school but their participation rate starts to drop in their
thirties. In 2012, the employment rate of women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four was 74 per cent, while that for men in the same age range was significantly higher at 93 per cent (Ministry of Manpower, 2012b). Women’s employment continually declines throughout their thirties, forties and fifties — at a higher rate than men’s — indicating that most do not return to work once they leave. In 2012, while the employment rate for men aged fifty-five to fifty-nine stood at a high 88 per cent, only 56 per cent of women in that age group were employed.

Among ‘economically inactive’ persons — those aged fifteen and above who are neither employed nor looking for employment — 65 per cent are women (Ministry of Manpower, 2012b). The rate of economic inactivity among women, at 42 per cent, is almost double that for men, at 24 per cent. Significantly, most women who are not in the formal workforce list housework and childcare as primary reasons: 43 per cent of women who are neither employed nor looking for employment cite ‘family responsibilities’, while less than 2 per cent of economically inactive men cite this reason (ibid.). In 2012, labour force participation rates of married women stood at 60.7 per cent, in contrast to married men’s participation rate of 84.9 per cent (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2013a). Additionally, among the economically inactive, a large majority (75 per cent) are people with secondary education or lower (Ministry of Manpower, 2012b). Women with less education are thus most likely to be economically inactive.

Not only are women, particularly less-educated women, more likely to be outside the formal workforce for care-giving reasons; their rates of unemployment are also higher than men’s. In June 2012, the non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Singapore stood at 3.7 per cent (Ministry of Manpower, 2010). The unemployment rate for men was 3.4 per cent compared to women’s 4.2 per cent. This difference persists across educational profiles. For those with lower secondary education, the unemployment rate for men was 3.1 per cent compared to women’s 4.9 per cent. For people with diplomas and professional qualifications (but not university degrees), the unemployment rate for men was 2.8 per cent while that for women was 4.1 per cent.

Women do most of the care-giving work in Singapore, both paid and unpaid. This gendered, unpaid or low-wage labour has been obscured or overlooked in recent budgets and debates regarding welfare reform. For a nation which has been obsessed with women’s fertility and the vitality of the workforce for four decades, the relative silence on women’s labour in the formal workforce, as well as women’s unpaid labour as care-givers, is striking. The amount of energy that has been invested in designing incentives and training programmes to ensure jobs for older, lower-skilled and, by default, male breadwinners is staggering compared to the effort directed toward drawing women into the workforce or keeping them there.

As the trends reveal, women as economic actors face different conditions and constraints than men. The picture of the imagined worker — who is
presumed to be constrained primarily only insofar as he lacks skills and credentials — becomes far more complicated when we take into account women’s numerous responsibilities that require their presence within the home at specific times. Training and upgrading programmes — to which the past few annual budgets have devoted immense attention and resources — do not address many women’s needs. Income supplements that only affect regular workers are less accessible to women, who are far more likely to take time off or work part-time in order to be care-givers for children or for elderly parents/relatives.

Despite the recent focus on low-wage labour, very little attention has been paid to the large wage differentials between men and women among low-wage workers, or to the differential incentives this creates for participating in wage work. Recent reforms have failed to even consider that women’s permanent or long-term departure from the workforce to fulfil care-giving responsibilities may affect the country’s overall productivity. There is, then, strong evidence of the state’s gendered lens or, perhaps more appropriately put, its gendered blinkers. Despite its urgent tone in discussing the ageing population, issues related to gendered care work and its effect on women’s lives, security and well-being have received almost no attention in major speeches and debates.

Indeed, not only have gendered imbalances been ignored by the state as it addresses unemployment, wage and productivity issues; state actions have often further entrenched lopsided gender roles. As elaborated below, this it has done by putting in place specific structures that attempt to produce a middle-class familial ideal wherein mothers are symbolically responsible for care-giving and the well-being of the home, and where grandmothers and foreign domestic workers do much of the everyday labour of care-giving. When it comes to cutting back on work in order to make way for childrearing, women are the ones who are expected to make adjustments and compelled to negotiate the often-elusive ‘work–life balance’. Men — regardless of their changing sensibilities toward marriage and fatherhood — are assumed to be principal earners and are relegated to playing supporting roles in care-giving.

The differentiation between men as employees/fathers and women as employees/mothers is stark: paid maternity leave for working married women has been increasing over the years and now stands at a respectable sixteen weeks. For a long time, employers were not legally obliged to provide any paternity leave at all, while a mere three days was the norm within the civil service and ‘recommended’ in general. In January 2013, married men were finally granted paternity leave — of just one week. These skewed leave provisions ensure that men and women are socialized into parenthood in vastly different ways. The path that parents embark on at the point of birth establishes patterns of differential responsibilities and capacities for mothers and fathers. These roles are supposedly ‘natural’ or deeply ‘cultural’, but they are reinforced through the structural realities of uneven access to time off
work and therefore to opportunities for acquiring competencies in carrying out care tasks.

Furthermore, while the relatively generous maternity leave provisions suggest a family-friendly work environment, at least for a certain class of women, in practice this is not necessarily the experience. Norms emphasizing the primacy of work and the illegitimacy of long periods of time off persist; in the interest of allowing companies flexibility and freedom, little has been done to compel significant changes in how companies organize work. Women therefore often experience guilt and insecurity — sometimes as a direct result of bosses and co-workers’ attitudes and actions — when they take time off work (Teo, 2011). Moreover, since women — but not men — are ‘entitled’ to such leave, they are the ones who have to take responsibility for deciding how long they can afford to be away from work.

At the same time, domestic work — household chores as well as the care of young and old — are further entrenched as women’s work through the huge influx of migrant workers. The state plays a major role in allowing and regulating the entry of women from a fixed set of neighbouring countries — Philippines and Indonesia foremost among them — to work as live-in, full-time and relatively low-cost domestic labour. For middle to high-income households, this option for housework and care-giving has increasingly become a norm. Whereas domestic struggles and negotiations within the home around issues of housework have the potential for altering gender dynamics for dual-earner heterosexual couples, this is diffused by the presence of the domestic worker. Housework, meanwhile, is further devalued; it not only persists as women’s work but also takes on the additional taint of being the low-paid work of women of lower ethno-national and class stature. Despite the availability of low-wage domestic labour, this state-sanctioned arrangement of family life is not in fact satisfactory for most. In the quest for work–life balance that preoccupies middle-class Singaporeans, many complain that this offers a ‘no choice’ solution (Teo, 2011).

On the other hand, low-income families do not have the luxury of thinking about work–life balance. Recent measures to help children of low-income households demonstrate a lack of understanding of the realities of poor women’s lives. To qualify for aid for childcare centres or after-school care, formal employment of mothers (or single fathers), working at least 56 hours per month, is a key criterion. While this does imply an effort to get women into the workforce, the lack of attention to the larger context of their household conditions suggests that it is oriented toward the larger anti-welfare approach of the Singapore state, designed to prevent ‘dependence’ rather

5. There are currently about 214,500 foreign domestic workers working in Singapore, close to one in five households (Ministry of Manpower, 2013).
6. For studies exploring how inequalities across class and ethno-national categories, including differential symbolic worth, are reproduced at the site of domestic servitude, see Chin (1998); Lan (2006); Ray and Qayum (2009).
than to enable women to improve their circumstances. As I am finding in my ongoing ethnographic work on low-income families in Singapore, the combination of paid employment and institutionalized childcare required by the subsidies is tremendously difficult to arrange.7

To begin with, most women in low-income households have limited formal education. Consequently, the jobs they can access are low-wage positions such as cleaners or janitors, workers in food service (often in school canteens), as ‘school bus aunties’ (assisting in taking care of children as they board and alight from school buses), supermarket cashiers and other customer service work. Some of this work is full-time and some part-time, but none of the jobs allow for much control over hours, much less for telecommuting. Securing a place in childcare centres close to their homes is often difficult. For low-income women, the difference between walking and travelling greater distances by bus is significant, both in terms of costs and in terms of the time it takes to get children to where they need to be, as well as getting to work on time.

Moreover, very young children need round-the-clock care, and this is not easily balanced with employment. Because of the lack of flexibility in hours, and the fixed hours of operation of childcare centres, many low-income women also need to make babysitting arrangements while children are not in school/childcare and they are still at work. Unlike higher-income women, they cannot afford substitute care-givers within the home. Mothers who work often have to leave young children unsupervised for long periods of time. Because they cannot afford to pay for household help, they have to take care of numerous household chores and responsibilities in addition to their paid employment, leading to high levels of physical and emotional stress. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that women who are less educated are significantly less likely to be in dual-career households (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2006); the costs to them and their families are simply too heavy to bear.

While recent budgets have been oriented toward addressing issues of wages and productivity, they have glossed over the fact that women presently have far greater responsibilities at home than men do. In fact, the view that improved productivity will follow from training and that this in turn leads to greater competitiveness and economic growth, is only viable when there is also unpaid and low-wage labour that reproduces the family. The family, presumed to be the motivator of hard work for breadwinners and the site for the literal production of future generations of workers is, oddly enough, also presumed to be able to regenerate on its own, with neither care workers nor significant social support. The state’s own policies with regard to leave structures and the management of migrant workers in care industries, and its inconsistent encouragement of women to enter the workplace,

7. Hays (2003) found similar difficulties of poor women being caught between bad care and employment options in the US as a result of welfare reforms toward ‘Workfare’.
creates and reproduces differences between women and men as workers and as family members. The differentiations it has historically made between women of higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds — stemming from an eugenics view in the early 1980s that saw better educated women as producers of higher quality children (Heng and Devan, 1995; Lee, 1983; Teo, 2009; Wong and Yeoh, 2003) — further reinforce class differences in the ‘choices’ that are available, and highlight the unequal symbolic worth of women’s labour both within and outside the domestic realm. Women of higher socioeconomic status are given an ‘out’ from domestic labour through displacement of this work to other women, effectively paying for their own replacements. Women of lower socioeconomic status are unable to pay for this themselves, but are given aid to do so only if they prove their worthiness by attempting to gain ‘self-reliance’ via formal employment. Ultimately, all women exit the workforce at much higher rates than men, with long-term negative implications for their security and well-being.

EVALUATING THE REFORMS

Let us now return to one of the questions posed earlier: will the government’s reforms achieve their explicit goals of sustained employment and higher incomes? The relatively low unemployment rates at a time of global economic downturn\(^8\) suggest that the measures have gone some way towards incentivizing companies to keep rather than retrench workers. The transfers to households have to some extent increased the incomes of the lowest-income households: for households living in one- and two-room flats (i.e. the smallest type of apartment) and with household income from work of S$ 8,134 per capita in 2012, government transfers amounted to 75.5 per cent of their household income from work (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012). Government transfers as percentage of household income from work for all households was far lower at 3.9 per cent. Notably, for households in the bracket just above the lowest category — i.e. those living in three-room flats and earning S$ 22,237 per capita — government transfers amounted to only 6.9 per cent of annual household income from work. For household income inequality among Resident employed households, as measured by the Gini coefficient (0.463 before and 0.412 after taxes and transfers; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2013), there was a slight downward trend from 2012 to 2013. Nonetheless, Singapore continues to rank among the highest

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8. The seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate was 3.1 per cent in 2007, 3.0 per cent in 2008, 4.5 per cent in 2009, 3.1 per cent in 2010, 3.0 per cent in 2011 and 2.8 per cent in 2012 (June). The percentage of ‘discouraged workers’ — people not actively looking for work because they do not think they would be successful — is generally low, ranging between 0.3 and 0.5 from 2007 to 2012, with an exceptional high of 0.6 only in 2009 (Ministry of Manpower, 2012b).
in terms of inequality, compared to other wealthy nations (CIA, 2014). It remains to be seen whether improvements can be sustained over time and how much they will aid those on low incomes. Here, the focus on subsidizing companies and the limited and conditional aid directed at low-income households are both relevant, as are the long-term implications of a welfare regime which is dependent on gendered familial self-sufficiency.

The first question to address is whether subsidies to companies will lead to higher wages over time. Economists have pointed out that the stalled growth of productivity has been an important feature of the Singapore economy; they argue that the steady growth in GDP over the years has been a result not of productivity gains but of the continual increase in ‘inputs’ (i.e. human labour) (Hui, 2013; Krugman, 1994; Lim, 2013). In this context, Hui (2011) argues that subsidizing companies’ payrolls to low-wage workers is unlikely to trigger much effort to improve productivity since the pay rises are not at the cost of employers’ profits. This is particularly true given the large and expanding pool of cheap, transient migrant labour from less wealthy countries in Asia which has been available to maintain the labour supply in Singapore. Furthermore, workers have very limited capacity to bargain with employers since unions are controlled by the state (Hui, 2011; Lim, 2013). Without sustained productivity gains, then, it seems unlikely that wage increases will be maintained if/when state subsidies are removed.

The second question is whether the various measures will translate into higher incomes for low-income households in the long run. As noted, wage increases are highly dependent on continued state subsidies. Moreover, the direct aid that goes to very low-income households is small in absolute amounts; it is also short-term and finite. ComCare, the fund ostensibly aimed at directly assisting low-income households, is designed to ‘build self-reliance’; families should ‘remain the first line of support’ (Ministry of Community Development, 2005, 2010). To this end, employment is an important precondition to receiving any form of aid, and much of the aid is not in the form of cash but in subsidies for childcare, utilities bills, training fees, etc. Cash assistance is generally modest and short-term. From conversations with social workers and low-wage earners, it is clear that these forms of help are barely enough to tide recipients over in dire circumstances — they are used to buy food, pay debts, and for other immediate needs. The funds are nowhere near enough to help households improve their material conditions in sustained ways.

In contrast to middle- and high-income households, low-income households never manage to accumulate enough to transcend their circumstances. Two forms of ‘investment’ play a role here: first, savings and investments in stocks, property, or even insurance plans that can reap long-term profits are out of their reach; second, whereas higher-income households spend substantial amounts of money on ‘enrichment’ classes and extra tuition to enable their children to do well in school, low-income households have limited access to these. Such routes to earning and sustaining higher income
The third important issue is the underemployment of women. The state’s lack of attention to women’s roles at home and their lower wages in the workplace have disproportionately negative effects on women in low-income households. Given the rising costs of living in Singapore, as well as the higher levels of investments necessary to secure upward social mobility and long-term financial security, the employment of women is an important way of enhancing the long-term material well-being of households. That women’s wages and conditions of labour have received such scant qualitative attention thus represents a serious neglect and a barrier for low-income households to achieve sustained improvements in household income. This neglect may ultimately be self-defeating: the family unit, so central to the current welfare regime, is under particularly intense pressure among the low-income. In the absence of significant changes to household incomes and/or expanded social mobility opportunities for children, the likelihood of self-sufficiency and adequate family support appears very slim. With fertility rates falling and the population ageing, the policy presumption that the old will be supported by their own children will become increasingly untenable for many Singaporeans.

Aside from asking if these measures will lead to sustained higher income, there is also the question of whether the reforms will lead to greater ‘social inclusion’. This entails not only changes to income distribution, but also the ethics and meanings around citizenship. To address this question, we need to shift our lens to look more broadly at the underlying principles and latent effects of the reforms, with an eye toward locating the values around citizenship embodied through welfare regimes.

THE MEANING AND TERMS OF CITIZENSHIP

Earlier in this article, I argued that scholarship on welfare reforms, particularly in East Asian countries where expansions are happening, has paid inadequate attention to the principles underlying these reforms. In evaluating the reforms’ effects on well-being, it is important to assess not just what is spent, but how it is spent, and based on what principles. It is crucial, too, to scrutinize who is favoured or overlooked. This allows for critical engagement with ongoing debates about the appropriate roles of state, society, families and individuals in the context of economic and demographic transitions.

‘Social compact’ and ‘social inclusion’ are now buzzwords in Singapore society. State officials speak often of ensuring continued meritocracy and opportunities for upward mobility; they speak too of ensuring that Singaporeans feel a sense of belonging and that economic development brings about benefits for all. While this implies mutual obligations of citizens via investments in oneself and one’s children remain closed to low-income households.
towards one another, and a greater application of equal rights and entitlements, policy practices do not always bear out these values.

I have already alluded to the centrality the state gives to the notion of self-reliance through employment. I have also highlighted the flexibility and generosity it shows toward companies, which contrasts sharply with its wary approach toward direct aid for low-income citizens. Finally, institutions and regulations often encourage — or even require — that people take care of the individual needs of their families, which often goes hand-in-hand with specific gendered roles. These are antithetical to forging citizenship as ‘social inclusion’. A social compact cannot be forged between corporations and society: corporations are not set up for the purpose of doing good; they have no obvious obligations toward equality, the good life, or any other values societies may aspire to. Their orientation is towards profit-maximization, often leading to exploitation. Moreover, among the corporate employers subsidized by the state, multinational companies are disproportionately represented (Lim, 2013) — companies that have little reason to be concerned by long-term social obligations within Singapore. It is problematic that a state’s platform for building a better society for its citizens is so heavily premised on the assumption that when corporations are granted support and flexibility, the outcome will automatically be good for society as a whole.

Inclusivity as a citizenship ideal suggests greater equality between peoples. Yet, policies are too often based on, and reproduce, differences. When women’s unpaid or low-wage labour is largely ignored in discussions of workers, the outcome is not the neutralization of gendered differences but the opposite — a consolidation of the differences in life experiences, interests and opportunities for women versus men. When women of different classes are offered different options for managing work and familial responsibilities, this entrenches class distinctions and inequalities. These class inequalities further compound gender inequalities. The public policy context in contemporary Singapore, including the recent reforms, shows inadequate commitment toward addressing these inequalities.

The welfare regime of Singapore thus suggests a vision of citizenship in which well-being is dependent on the individual’s efforts and success or failure, at work and within the family. Beyond the regular invocation of phrases like ‘social inclusion’, there has been little in the reforms to suggest a vision of citizenship that includes a deeper sense of mutual and shared obligations in society, a sense of universal needs, entitlements, and shared solutions.

CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT?

Having sketched out the limitations of ongoing reforms, one must ask: what is the way forward? As Peng and Wong (2004) have argued, political transition toward democratization — with greater competition for political
office and the emergence of civil society activism — was an important precondition for the expansion and transformation of welfare regimes in South Korea and Taiwan. The Singapore case — with a dominant one-party state and relatively weak opposition parties, labour unions and civil society — provides evidence in support of this thesis. More generally, the one-party state’s interests in perpetuating its political power both explain the reforms thus far and suggest future developments.

As Ng (2012) points out, there have been numerous state interventions over the years targeted at the low-income but these are all in the form of discretionary ‘windfall and rainy day hand-outs’ rather than institutionalized entitlements. These hand-outs are strongly associated with the ruling government and are used as political capital insofar as they ostensibly provide evidence of the success of the People’s Action Party (PAP) in bringing about widespread prosperity. The PAP state’s public pledges toward ‘social inclusion’ have intensified since the general elections of 2011, when discontent around immigration, high costs of living and insecurity surfaced and resulted in some electoral losses for the PAP. This too suggests that reforms happen partly in response to actions that challenge the one-party state’s hegemony.

The way forward, then, depends on how, and to what extent, political parties and civil society harness the growing discontent of the electorate. Opposition political parties and civil society organizations both have serious resource limitations; the latter in particular are often dependent on state-linked institutions for funding. More importantly, there are forces both conservative and progressive within these groups. While there are voices calling for enhanced universal healthcare and help for the poorest Singaporeans, there are equally persistent voices questioning the need for higher taxes and pointing to the dangers of dependence. Moreover, calls on the state to do more often reinforce rather than disrupt gender inequalities; there have been demands, for example, for greater focus on improving women’s fertility. There are also levels of unrest directed at migrants, which can easily deteriorate into scapegoating. If current trends of reform are anything to go by, we can expect to see the state doing more in response to the rising but still largely unorganized dissent, but without any reconfiguration of the underlying logic. It is thus particularly important that analyses of continuing reforms interrogate not just expansions of the reforms per se, but also the direction and principles of the reforms and the ways in which they represent both change and stasis.

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