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Pandemic, politics and pandemonium: political capacity and Singapore's response to the Covid-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

Singapore's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has largely been seen as timely and effective, with border lock-downs and contact tracing efforts by city-state's policymakers serving to slow down the spread of the virus. Yet despite such efforts, there have been instances of panic and confusion among the Singaporean citizenry. These include "panic buying" of essential household items as well as the spread of fake news. In this article, I will discuss the Singapore government's efforts to address and minimize such behavior. I argue that the Singapore government's ability to maintain relative social stability is driven by its high level of political capacity. Two forms of political capacity are particularly relevant: coercive political capacity and legitimation capacity. In focusing on political capacity, this paper seeks to delineate the political systemic drivers of Singapore's efforts to manage the Covid-19 crisis.

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted Singapore severely. As of writing, the number of confirmed infections in Singapore has exceeded 57,000, while its economy has contracted by 41.2% in the second quarter of 2020. Yet despite these high infection rates and deep economic contraction, Singapore's healthcare system has remained highly resilient, with bed occupancy rates (BOR) at its major public hospitals well below 95%, as of July 2020 (Ministry of Health 2020a). Fatalities have also remained relatively low despite such high infection rates, with 27 Covid-19-related deaths reported thus far.

While there has been emerging research on the policy capacities that have contributed to these positive healthcare outcomes (Woo 2020a), much less has been said about the political capacities that have driven Singapore's Covid-19 response. This lacuna in the literature extends beyond Singapore as well, with much of the emerging Covid-19 research focused on healthcare systemic capacities rather than the political capacities

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that are often required to mobilize healthcare resources and implement Covid-19 policy responses.

In their recent work on Covid-19, Kavanagh and Singh have found that the countries which had previously been thought to possess high levels of capacity for outbreak response have paradoxically failed to respond effectively to the pandemic, with the United States and United Kingdom being cases in point (Kavanagh and Singh 2020). As Kavanagh and Singh have noted, “Strong infrastructure and “stability” are clearly not sufficient. The state, in all its capacity, must be mobilized through political processes” (Kavanagh and Singh 2020, 5).

In this article, I will discuss the political capacities that have been mobilized by the Singapore government to maintain social order and ensure public compliance with its Covid-19 measures. I argue that the Singapore’s high level of public compliance with Covid-19 measures and its social stability is driven by the government’s ability to maintain a delicate balance between coercive political capacities and legitimation capacities.

In focusing on political capacity, this article seeks to delineate the political systemic drivers of Singapore’s policy success in managing the Covid-19 crisis. By emphasizing the complex interlinkages between coercive political capacities and legitimation capacities, this article also aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how political capacity can be mobilized to achieve policy goals.

2. Political capacity

As a concept, political capacity has gone through multiple iterations of theorization and is hence related to various different aspects of policymaking and the policy process. There are nonetheless two discernible aspects or forms of political capacity that can be gleaned from the existing literature. The first of these concerns a government’s ability to attain policy goals through more coercive and intrusive means that seek to manage or balance multiple interests and stakeholders. The second is focused on the government’s ability to maintain trust and legitimacy, thereby ensuring greater public compliance with and acceptance of its policies and regulations.

There is no doubt that both understandings of political capacity place a strong focus on achieving the government’s desired policy goals. What differs between the two is the means through which this is achieved. While the coercive form of political capacity emphasizes an active role of government in *pushing* through its policies amidst competing interests and even resistance, the legitimacy-centred understanding of political capacity focuses on *compelling* societal and industry actors to comply with government rules and regulations through trust and persuasion. I will briefly discuss these two broad forms of political capacity in turn.

According to Kugler (2018, 1), political capacity refers to the “ability of political systems to carry out the tasks chosen by the nation’s government in the face of domestic and international groups with competing priorities.” This connection between capacity and policy outcome is emphasized by Mukherjee and Bali (2019), who relate capacity to policymakers’ ability to bring about effective policy solutions.

More broadly speaking, this instrumental focus on policy goal attainment stems from early work on “state capacity” by scholars of international relations who had

focused on the military strength of a state as an indicator of its ability to navigate a realist and anarchic international system (Skocpol and Finegold 1982; Jackman 1993; Besley and Persson 2008, 2010; Hendrix and Young 2012; Gennaioli and Voth 2015). States that lack such political capacity are frequently described as ‘failed states’ (Rotberg 2002; Brinkerhoff 2005; Hameiri 2007; Hendrix 2010).

There is therefore a coercive and intrusive aspect to political capacity. For instance, Rouyer (1987, 453) defines political capacity as the “ability of government to penetrate society and extract resources.” The politically capable state is therefore also an “extractive” state that is able to obtain the resources, by force if necessary, that are needed in order to achieve its policy goals (Evans 1989; Grabowski 1994; Evans 2014; Kugler and Arbetman 2018).

This extractive and coercive form of political capacity is often deployed during an emergency or crisis, with the invoking of emergency powers often granting political leaders greater ability to extract and allocate resources during an emergency (Fisunoğlu and Rooney 2020). As Kavanagh and Singh (2020) have shown, coercive measures, often exercised in autocratic or semi-authoritarian contexts, have proven to be highly effective in containing the Covid-19 outbreak. However, the extended use of coercive political capacity can result in an erosion of trust and inefficient government allocation of resources in the longer run (Fisunoğlu and Rooney 2020; Kavanagh and Singh 2020).

There are therefore limitations to the extended use of coercive political capacity. Driven in part by the end of the Cold War, subsequent efforts to conceptualize policy capacity have focused on the role of institutions and economic performance rather than military strength (Johnson 1995; Leftwich 1995; Perraton 2005; Besley and Persson 2010; Kasahara 2013). Of particular significance during this period is the East Asian developmental state literature, which associated political capacity with the state’s ability to maintain high levels economic growth, or what developmental state scholars term “performance legitimacy” (Leftwich 1995; Woo-Cumings 1999; Perraton 2005; Pierre, Røiseland, and Gustavsen 2011; Woo 2018).

Much of this later work focused on the institutional foundations that allow governments to effectively formulate and implement policies as well as enact and enforce laws (Fukuyama 2004, 2013). Hence aside from state strength, other institutions and organs of the state such as the bureaucracy and judiciary also play a part in ensuring greater political capacity (Fukuyama 2011, 2014). This inclusion of institutional variables would also give rise to a greater appreciation of the variety of institutions that foster collective action (Ostrom 1990, 1994, 1998, 2005) and contribute to “social capital” (Putnam 1993).

This focus on collective action and social capital would form the ideological foundation for the second conception political capacity, which focuses on trust and legitimacy rather than power and authority. This understanding of political capacity is drawn from an emerging body of work on policy capacity, which emphasizes the systemic and organizational institutions and resources that contribute to policy effectiveness (Bakvis 2000; Painter and Pierre 2004, 2005; Gleeson et al. 2011; Wu, Howlett, and Ramesh 2018). Political capacity therefore exists as a subset of the broader policy capacity literature, with political trust and public support as well as the nature of the political

economic system seen as key determinants of policy effectiveness (Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015, 167).

Also known as legitimation capacity, political capacity is seen as comprising the socio-political trust, policy and political communications skills, and broader legitimation processes necessary for public agencies and policymakers to ensure public support for policies and foster greater compliance with rules and regulations (Woo, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015). At its broadest conception, political or legitimation capacity operates by fostering socio-political trust within the four spheres of policy action, namely the social realm, political environment, economic sphere, and the security apparatus (Woo, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015).

Such efforts at maintaining trust would presumably involve both systemic variables such as procedural justice and participatory democratic processes as well as individual/organizational competencies such as political communication, policy effectiveness and economic performance, as well as taking a consultative approach to policy and public engagement (Rhodes 1996; Newman et al. 2004; Ansell and Gash 2007; Woo, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015; Woo 2016; Wu, Howlett, and Ramesh 2018). Hence unlike coercive capacities, legitimation capacity requires a less overt approach of communication, persuasion and trust-building.

Certainly, coercive means alone may not be sufficient for containing the Covid-19 outbreak. Citing the case of South Korea, Kavanagh and Singh (2020) argue that a combination of public healthcare measures with voluntary measures and behavioral nudges can be just as effective, if not more so, as coercive measures. They further argue that while coercive measures can bring short-term results, these may in the longer term serve to reduce trust instead, eroding the government's political capacity.

The two main forms of political capacity that I have discussed thus far can therefore at times run counter to each other. While coercive capacities can help governments achieve short-term policy objectives, the extended use of such capacities may in the longer-term result in the erosion of political trust. Conversely, the procedural and consultative mechanisms that help build up trust may cause delays in the policy process. These delays can be particularly harmful during a crisis. These conflicting dynamics are illustrated in Table 1 below.

For instance, procedural and logistical delays in the United States had resulted in a rapid rise of Covid-19 infections and prevented public officials from mounting a swift response to the crisis (Ghosh 2020; Zhao 2020).

However, it should also be noted that interdependencies may also exist between the two forms of political capacities. For instance, the successful deployment of coercive political measures does require a certain extent of political trust and legitimacy. As the case of Hong Kong has shown, coercive measures can give rise to public discontent, and even resistance, in the absence of sufficient political trust. Conversely, the efficacy with which coercive political capacities can give rise to positive societal outcomes can

Table 1. Political capacity dynamics.

	Short-term impacts	Long-term implications
Coercive political capacity	Policy expediency	Erosion of political trust
Legitimation capacity	Policy delays	Build-up of trust and legitimacy

help boost the government's legitimacy, while policy failures despite the use of coercive political capacities can certainly erode political trust.

There is therefore a certain level of circularity and interdependency between coercive political capacity and legitimation capacity. However, it remains generally true that the application of coercive political capacity is associated with a greater extent of centralized state authority while the use of legitimation capacity involves more policy deliberation and consultation. For the purposes of the discussions in this article, it is this exercise of authority vis-à-vis consensus-building through deliberation that distinguishes coercion from legitimation as political capacity mechanisms.

As my discussion of the case of Singapore's Covid-19 response will show, the ability to translate political capacity into policy effectiveness hinges upon a delicate balance between coercive political capacity and legitimation capacity. In less urgent periods, Singapore has also shown this ability such as in its careful rollout of NEWater or recycled drinking water (RDW). The country has balanced coercive capacity by gradually increasing RDW from 1% to 2.5% of daily water consumption, while building legitimation capacity (Leong 2016).

3. Power and legitimacy in Singapore's Covid-19 response

The Covid-19 coronavirus first entered Singapore on 20 January 2020, through a Chinese National from Wuhan who was tested positive for the virus on 23 January 2020 (Yong 2020c). Border control and screening measures, particularly for travelers from Wuhan, had already been put in place from 2 January 2020, after the identification of Wuhan as an emerging Covid-19 cluster by the WHO on 31 December 2019. More cases of infection would be reported in the weeks to come, initially through imported cases from China but subsequently through community transmission.

As of writing the number of confirmed Covid-19 infections in Singapore have exceeded 56,000. However, Covid-19-related fatalities remain low at 27. As I have argued elsewhere, Singapore's low level of Covid-19 fatalities, despite its high infection numbers, reflect its high levels of operational, analytical, material and political capacities (Woo 2020a, 2020b). In this paper, I will focus on the political capacities that have contributed to Singapore's ongoing Covid-19 response efforts, as well as the political capacities that have been built up amidst the city-state's ongoing struggle with the pandemic.

Singapore's experience with the Covid-19 pandemic presents a unique case study. While its reputation as a semi-authoritarian developmental state suggests some leeway in its ability to draw on coercive political capacity (George 2007; Rodan 2008; Tan 2012; Barr 2014), the presence of procedural democratic processes suggests a continued need to maintain socio-political trust and garner public support.

Indeed, the Singapore government enjoys a high level of political trust. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2020, public trust in the government increased by 3 percentage points to 70 percent, with trust in Singapore's institutions particularly strong (Rekhi 2020). As I will discuss below, the ruling's ability to secure a majority during the 2020 general elections also reflect a relatively high level of public trust among in the government. Hence despite caricatures of semi-authoritarianism, the reality is that

Table 2. Covid-19 political capacities and Covid-19 measures.

Coercive political capacity	Legitimation capacity
Safe distancing	Multi-ministry task force
Circuit breaker	Information dissemination
Purchase limits on daily essentials	General elections
POFMA	

politics and governance in Singapore can better be characterized as a balance between trust and authority.

This Janus-faced nature of political capacity in Singapore was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. While coercive measures such as safe distancing measures, a de facto lock-down and tough laws on fake news were implemented to manage the impacts of the pandemic, the government also relied on legitimating measures such as daily Covid-19 updates, press conferences by a Multi-Ministry Task Force as well as individual ministers, and even a general election, to encourage public compliance with its Covid-19 measures as well as maintain public trust.

These major capacities, represented by the various Covid-19 measures that were implemented during the early stages of the pandemic, are illustrated in [Table 2](#).

3.1. Coercive political capacity

The first set of policy measures that relied on coercive political capacities is the slew of social distancing measures, or “safe distancing” measures, that were introduced from 7 February 2020, after the government had raised its Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) level from yellow to orange, signifying the severity and rapid spread of the virus. These safe distancing measures were introduced in a graduated manner, with the first set of community measures deferring and canceling public events involving 250 participants or more (Ministry of Health [2020b](#)) and subsequent measures requiring safe distancing measures in all public venues and spaces as well as an across-the-board cancellation of all mass public events (Ministry of Health [2020c](#)).

These measures would culminate in the second major coercive policy measure: a 2-month-long “circuit breaker” that began on 7 April and ended on 1 June. The circuit breaker was essentially a stay-home order that required workers to telecommute and schools to engage in internet-mediated home-based learning, with all non-essential retail stores ordered to close and all residents required to stay at home except for essential activities such as purchasing foods, groceries or medical supplies (Ministry of Health [2020d](#)).

Public compliance was ensured through strict rules and tough penalties against those who flout circuit breaker rules. This included fines of up to SG \$10,000 and/or a jail term of up to 6 months for first time offenders and a fine of SG \$20,000 and/or a jail term of up to 12 months for subsequent offenders (Rajoo [2020](#)). For expatriate workers, or “work pass holders,” breaches of circuit breaker measures could result in the revoking of their work passes and repatriation to their home country (Ministry of Manpower [2020](#)).

Yet despite the imposition of the circuit breaker as well as the fines and penalties meted out to offenders, there were many instances of individuals and groups flouting

circuit breaker rules. For instance, 2,900 stern warnings were issued while 40 individuals were fined on the fourth day of the circuit breaker (Yong 2020a). This suggests limits to coercive policy measures, with some individuals willing to face the risk of heavy penalties and fines by circumventing and flouting circuit breaker measures.

Aside from social distancing and the circuit breaker, coercive political capacities were also mobilized to impose purchase limits on selected essential items at supermarkets, so as to ensure their continued availability. For instance, purchase limits were introduced on 9 February and further tightened on 27 March by NTUC Fair Price, Singapore's largest supermarket chain. Under these limits, consumers were only allowed during each visit to the supermarket to purchase up to (Yong 2020b):

- Two packs of paper products (facial tissues, toilet paper, etc.)
- Two packs of instant noodles or pasta
- SG \$30 of vegetables
- SG \$30 of fresh, frozen and processed poultry
- 30 eggs
- 6 canned products
- 5 liters of cooking oil.

These limits were imposed in response to multiple instances of panic buying across supermarkets and grocery stores in Singapore, with the first spate of panic buying sparked off by the raising of the DORSCON level from green to orange (Business Times 2020). The panic buying has been attributed to citizens' awareness of recent panic buying in Hong Kong, an earlier shortage of face masks in Singapore, and a general knee jerk reaction to the raising of the DORSCON level, while communications scholars have argued that the panic buying could have been avoided with better public communications by the government, especially in terms of the explaining the definition of DORSCON orange (Low and Chandra 2020).

Subsequent efforts by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Ministry for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing to assuage public fears of supply shortages would help quell the panic buying, with Chan's emphasis on Singapore's "national stockpile" of essential goods playing an important role in restoring public confidence (Low and Chandra 2020).

Hence while the panic buying suggest shortcomings in the government's initial public communications, subsequent efforts by political leaders to assuage public fears of essential goods shortages reflect the mobilization of legitimation capacity through effective political communications. In any case, the imposition of grocery purchase limits represents a highly intrusive policy measure that dictates how much of each essential product that consumers are allowed to buy. This is a policy measure that required high levels of coercive political capacity.

Lastly, the proliferation of online falsehoods, or "fake news," required the government to mobilize its coercive political capacities in order to manage and dispel these falsehoods. Of particular significance in these efforts is the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). Passed in Parliament on 2 October 2019, POFMA is a statute that empowers authorities to curb the spread of fake news through

Table 3. Multi-ministry taskforce on Covid-19.

Role	Member	Ministry/Agency
Co-Chairs	Mr Gan Kim Yong Minister for Health	Ministry of Health
	Mr Lawrence Wong Minister for National Development	Ministry of National Development
Advisor	Mr Heng Swee Keat Deputy Prime Minister	
Members	Mr S Iswaran Minister for Communications and Information	Ministry of Communications and Information
	Mr Chan Chun Sing Minister for Trade and Industry	Ministry of Trade and Industry
	Mr Masagos Zulkifli Minister for the Environment and Water Resources	Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources
	Mr Ng Chee Meng Minister, Prime Minister's Office Secretary-General of National Trades Union Congress	National Trades Union Congress
	Mr Ong Ye Kung Minister for Education	Ministry of Education
	Mrs Josephine Teo Minister for Manpower	Ministry of Manpower
	Mr Desmond Lee Minister for Social and Family Development	Ministry of Social and Family Development
	Dr Janil Puthuchear Senior Minister of State	Ministry of Transport

a range of measures, such as correction notices, stop communication directions, censorship, fines and imprisonment (Ministry of Law 2019; POFMA Office 2020). A “POFMA Office” was set up to administer the POFMA (Hussain 2019).

The POFMA was implemented in several instances during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong issued a correction direction to online news blog Singapore States Times and Facebook over a Facebook post by Singapore States Times that contained multiple false statements (CNA. 2020a, 2020a; Ng 2020). Tougher penalties were subsequently meted out due to noncompliance, with the Facebook pages of Singapore States Times and its owner Alex Tan labeled “Declared Online Locations” (DOLs) under the POFMA (CNA. 2020c). This required the affected Facebook pages to carry a notice stating that these pages have been communicating falsehoods and hence been declared DOLs.

Correction directions were also issued to the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS), Channel News Asia (CNA), and online blogsites The Online Citizen Asia (TOC) and New Naratif on 6 July 2020 for carrying false statements on the Ministry of Manpower’s alleged attempts to discourage the testing of migrant workers for Covid-19; these statements were made by opposition politician Paul Tambyah during a pre-general election Forum (Choo 2020). The POFMA therefore allows the government actively intervene to curb and manage the spread of fake news by leveraging on coercive political capacities such as strict regulations and heavy penalties.

3.2. Legitimation capacity

Aside from coercive political capacity, Singapore has also sought to leverage its legitimation capacity in order to build up political trust and foster public compliance with

Covid-19 response measures. This began with the formation of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on 22 January 2020. Established to lead and direct Singapore's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Taskforce was co-chaired by Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong and Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong and included Ministers from the various relevant Ministries that were expected to be involved in Singapore's Covid-19 response.

More than simply a matter of providing top-down leadership, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce also ensures greater accountability by the government, by situating the responsibility of managing the Covid-19 outbreak in the two Co-Chairs. As I will discuss below, such accountability can help contribute to greater public trust in the government, and hence legitimacy in its policy measures. [Table 3](#) provides a list of the Ministries and Ministers that form the Multi-Ministry Taskforce.

Aside from leading Singapore's Covid-19 policy responses, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce also played a key role in public communications. This took the form of frequent press conferences that were convened to provide the public with updated information on Covid-19 infections and announce new policy measures. These press conferences therefore represent another form of legitimization capacity that serves to build up public trust through greater transparency. Aside from the Multi-Ministry Taskforce, Ministers have also on their own accord convened press conferences and given press statements.

From 7 June to 20 June 2020, a series of national broadcasts were delivered by PM Lee, DPM Heng, Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong, and Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing, with each Minister focusing on a different aspect of Singapore's future outlook amidst the pandemic (Tham 2020). These national broadcasts provided forward guidance for citizens and businesses by preparing them for the nature of work, life and the economy during the periods immediately after the end of the circuit breaker.

Aside from ministerial statements and press conferences, the Singapore government also ensured effective and transparent dissemination of information through multiple channels and platforms. The most important of these channels is the Ministry of Health's daily update, which provides updated information on daily infection and fatality rates, as well as the locations that infected persons have visited. These updates are published on the Ministry's website and broadcasted on Singapore's major mainstream media outlets on a daily basis. The Singapore government also relied on online media platforms such as Whatsapp, Telegram, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, to provide real-time updates on Singapore's Covid-19 situation (Ministry of Communications and Information 2020).

Such efforts at public communication have been held up as a key determinant of success in Singapore's Covid-19 response efforts, with government directions and communications seen as clear and concise (Heijmans 2020; Hsu and Tan 2020; Sagar 2020). Such channels of information dissemination can therefore be seen as a key form of legitimization capacity, with government communications contributing to public compliance with Covid-19 measures by providing citizens with timely information and clear guidance. In sum, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce and the government's

multi-faceted efforts at public communication serve as legitimating processes that ensure greater transparency and legitimacy in the government's policy processes as well as help build up political trust and foster greater public compliance with its Covid-19 measures.

The last form and manifestation of legitimation capacity involves a general election that was held on 10 July 2020, barely a month after the end of Singapore's circuit breaker. Whether in democratic or non-democratic contexts, elections have long been seen as an important legitimating mechanism, providing governments and their leaders with the political mandate and public support needed for policy implementation and enforcement (Pierre, Røiseland, and Gustavsen 2011; Gerschewski 2013; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Chu 2019; Morgenbesser and Pepinsky 2019). Elections, particularly the democratic accountability that they confer, are held up as a key pillar of political capacity (Moe and Caldwell 1994; Fukuyama 2011; Pierre, Røiseland, and Gustavsen 2011; Morgenbesser and Pepinsky 2019).

In Singapore, competitive elections have allowed the PAP to achieve a high level of trust and legitimacy (Mutalib 2002; Tan 2013, 2014; Singh 2017), with the "normative and symbolic value of elections" serving to establish moral grounds for policy compliance (Morgenbesser 2017). This is reflected in the Edelman Trust Barometer, which finds public trust in the Singaporean government to have risen over the years to its current level of 70%.

The government's decision to call for a general election can therefore be seen as an attempt to secure a strong mandate for its ongoing Covid-19 response efforts, with key Ministers such as Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing calling for the public to give the government a strong mandate in order to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic during election campaigning (Cheung 2020; Toh 2020b).

While the PAP's 61% vote-share has declared a "clear mandate" for the government (Lai 2020), the decline in vote-share from the 2015 general elections points toward a broader decline in public support for the government due to long-standing local issues (Moss 2020). The general election can therefore be thought of as an important legitimating mechanism that has allowed the government to obtain its political mandate and provide legitimacy for its ongoing Covid-19 policy measures. Yet as the PAP's decline in vote-share has made clear, an election can also serve to signify some level of decline in the government's political legitimacy. This makes elections a double-edged sword, with a decline in vote-share serving to undermine, rather than boost, a government's legitimation capacity.

4. Conclusion: coercion and legitimacy in times of crisis

Singapore's experience with managing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has proven instructive on several levels. While much has been written about the efficacy of the city-state's healthcare system and policy measures (Heijmans 2020; Hsu and Tan 2020; Woo 2020a, 2020b), much less has been said about the political drivers and implications of its Covid-19 response efforts. In this paper, I have sought to understand the political capacities that have driven Singapore's hitherto success in containing and

managing the Covid-19 pandemic and preventing potential outbreaks and infection clusters.

I have focused specifically on two forms of political capacity: coercive political capacity and legitimization capacity. While coercive political capacity involves extensive government interventions and the use of “hard” policy tools such as strict rules and tough penalties, legitimization capacity takes a “softer” approach by relying on political trust and legitimization mechanisms to foster greater public compliance with Covid-19 measures. As I have shown in this paper, Singapore’s Covid-19 response efforts have straddled a fine balance between coercion and legitimacy by relying on both forms of political capacity to ensure public compliance as well as build up political trust and legitimacy.

However, it is also important to note that the two forms of political capacity do not always operate in tandem, nor are they necessarily developed and mobilized simultaneously. Paradoxically, the use of coercive political capacity can in the medium term give rise to a loss in political trust. This can in turn erode overall political capacity in the long term. While coercive means have also been shown to be highly effective in managing the Covid-19 outbreak, especially in the cases of China, Singapore and South Korea (Kavanagh and Singh 2020; Woo 2020a), there may be longer term impacts on political trust in these countries.

Indeed, there are already emerging signs of declining trust due to over-reliance on coercive policy tools. For instance, the use of POFA correction notices on online blogsites and opposition politicians has given rise to some public unhappiness and criticism in Singapore (Han and Loke 2020; Shunmuganathan 2020). The PAP’s decline in vote-share during the general elections and public resistance to circuit breaker measures in some rare instances also reflect some extent of degradation in public trust. It may however be too early to assess the full impacts of Singapore’s use of coercive political capacity on longer-term political trust. More time and research will be needed.

Conversely, an over-emphasis on legitimating mechanisms and processes, whether these are public consultation, referendums or other procedural participatory processes, can result in significant delays to the policy process, and act as curbs to the possible use of coercive capacities. Furthermore, high levels of trust can at times affect public compliance with rules and policies. For instance, Wong and Jensen (2020) have found that high levels of trust in the Singapore government had given rise to public complacency, with the implication being lower levels of compliance with social distancing rules as well as lower risk perception among the public. This was evident in the many infractions that occurred during the circuit breaker (Heng and Rajendran 2020; Toh 2020a; Yong 2020a).

There are therefore complex interlinkages between coercive political capacity and legitimization capacity, with the exercise of each potentially posing longer-term implications for overall political capacity. As I have noted above, the two forms of political capacity can also feed into each other, with coercion requiring a certain extent of political trust and the successful application of coercive political capacity giving rise to greater trust in the government. More research is needed, in order that these interdependencies are fully explored and their implications addressed.

Nonetheless, the case of Singapore has shown how navigating a fine balance between the two forms of political capacities can help governments overcome the short and

medium-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, even if longer-term impacts are as yet uncertain. For policymakers, there is a need to fine-tune this balance between coercive political capacity and legitimation capacity by deploying a broad range of policy instruments that includes both regulatory measures and deliberative forums.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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