

**CHERIAN
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**AIR-CONDITIONED
NATION REVISITED**
ESSAYS ON
SINGAPORE POLITICS

“Cherian George is one of Singapore’s most astute political observers and social commentators. This collection of essays, drawing on events that traverse the last few decades, takes us through intriguing encounters and noteworthy moments in Singapore’s recent past. From political dissidents to governing elites, newspaper editors to bloggers, the presidential election to Hong Lim Park, Professor George reminds us of incidents and people too quickly forgotten or under-interpreted. Each matters because they clear up some puzzle as to how we got here. Even better, they invite us to reconsider: where is ‘here?’ Infused with Cherian’s wit, humor, audacity, and above all with his steadfast idealism and generosity, this is that rare book on politics that encourages clear-headedness and yet holds cynicism at bay. Read it, share it, read it again: this book will spark feelings, stir thoughts, create conversations, engage our muscles for debate and disagreement—all things we deserve as humans living in society.”

—Teo You Yenn, author of *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*

“It is a testament to the enduring relevance of Cherian’s scholarship that we still see the politics of comfort and control play out in Singapore and can turn to these essays to make sense and meaning of it. What Cherian has done, far more than any other scholar, is to provide a language of power that is at once accessible and unique to local sensibilities. That these essays have been expanded and updated two decades later for a renewed reading of the political temperature of this air-conditioned nation is a delight for students of Singapore studies, be they everyday current affairs junkies, academics or journalists.”

—Simon Vincent, author of *The Naysayer’s Book Club*

“A functioning democracy requires a multitude of sensible voices in the public sphere. Such voices are needed to raise critical questions, provide sober analyses and suggest viable solutions that can be tapped on for deliberations by policymakers, cultural workers and political leaders. Such is the role of a public intellectual: one that is most fitting to describe Cherian George and his intellectual forays. The incisive, robust and passionate essays in this book provide hope and renew our imagination for what is possible in a technocratic society like Singapore.”

—Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, co-editor of *Budi Kritik*

**CHERIAN
GEORGE**

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For Zuraidah

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PREFACE

IT'S SAID THAT if you hoard your old clothes long enough, they'll come back in fashion. They could look fresh to a younger generation who were in diapers when you first wore them. As for your contemporaries, they may approve of what was obiang yesterday, but retro today. It's all about timing.

For almost 20 years, I thought it was too soon to reopen my first book, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation*, even for my own private viewing. Partly because I'm not that self-absorbed, but mainly to spare myself the potential embarrassment. Published by Landmark Books in 2000, the book remains on the shelves at Kinokuniya, and I still get the occasional compliment from a new reader. But I feared that rereading the book would be as cringeworthy as trying on bell-bottoms (not that I've kept any). I didn't even skim through it before writing my 2017 collection, *Singapore, Incomplete*. I didn't want to be influenced by the younger me, nor be discouraged by proof that the written word rarely stands the test of time.

I was slightly emboldened by the impending arrival of the year 2020—an objectively meaningless milestone, but a symbolically compelling moment to revisit the past. I had also noticed that my years of young adulthood, when I started writing about Singapore politics, were beginning to receive the nostalgic treatment. Thus, the hit 2016 Netflix series *Stranger Things* transported viewers to the mid-1980s. *Captain Marvel* (2019) was a “period film” set in the mid-1990s. CNA's documentary series *In Our Time* looked back at Singapore from the 1960s to the nineties and noughties. The 1990s as “history”? By that reckoning, perhaps *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation* now has some archaeological value, at the very least.

This 20th anniversary edition combines most of the essays from that book (which I finally reread in January 2020) and *Singapore, Incomplete*, plus a few new pieces. I have shortened and reorganised

some of the old essays, but I've not updated any. Each essay is stamped with its original year of publication to help readers make sense of the shifts in focus, context and even writing style.

What hasn't changed since 2000 is my interest in Singapore's democratic life. The first book dealt with Singapore's politics in the ten years following Lee Kuan Yew's handover of the premiership to Goh Chok Tong. "Reflecting my own interests, there is a particular focus on questions of political openness and national identity," I wrote in the preface. *Singapore, Incomplete* was, similarly, a critique of the ruling party's intolerance of diverse perspectives and its missteps in managing cultural diversity. "More respect for different ways of thinking and more freedom to challenge authority will make us a stronger society," I wrote.

Also unchanged is my effort to be reasonable and fair, even in my more opinionated writing. That's not to say that I aim for neutrality or false balance. I can't be neutral, because I'm a citizen with emotional stakes in my country. My loyalty isn't transferable to other countries the way investments may flow in and out based on objective credit ratings. Since my heart is stuck in Singapore, I want my country to be the best it can be, even if that means giving unwelcome criticism to leaders convinced everything is as it should be. As for trying to be balanced, I don't, as there's little chance that a reader won't know the official narrative, or at least have ready access to it. So I take it as read, and proceed from there.

Twenty years seems a long time in the life of a fast-changing city-state. In that time, the number of people in Singapore rose by 45 per cent. The nation got richer (per capita income adjusted for purchasing power jumped 60 per cent), and more developed (its global human development index ranking, which includes education and health measures, climbed from the mid-20s to the top 10). Singaporeans are more connected (adults using the mobile internet went from zero to 80 per cent), and live longer (life expectancy at birth increased by five years). We've become more educated: there are twice as many public-funded universities. And feel less secure: back then, 9-11 was a phone number, not an event, and we didn't need DORSCON. In 2000,

there was no Marina Bay Sands on the skyline, no North East Line to ride, and no families taking a TreeTop Walk at MacRitchie, other than longtailed macaques.

The political system, though, has remained exceptionally stable. When UMNO lost power in Malaysia in 2018, the People's Action Party became the non-communist world's most enduring governing party; no other party matches its winning streak in national elections. Singapore's leaders would attribute this extraordinary accomplishment to a virtuous circle of good governance and popular support. I wouldn't dismiss this claim entirely. But the ruling party's resistance to change could also be self-serving, retarding our maturation as a society. As Tyrion Lannister put it in *Game of Thrones*: "It is easy to confuse what is with what ought to be, especially when what is has worked in your favour." Distinguishing Singapore as it is from Singapore as it ought to be motivates my writing. I see no contradiction between feeling fortunate for having been born Singaporean, and a persistently critical stance towards my country. One explains the other.

This book is one result of this persistence. Perhaps, though, revisiting my older essays should indeed have discouraged me from proceeding with this project. Not because their ideas are no longer in fashion. More because they never were. After all, measured by their effect on the course of events, my three decades of writing opinion pieces have been largely an exercise in futility. But then that was never the kind of gratification I was after. It was and is enough for me that there are some Singaporeans who are not content to switch off their critical faculties and let people in power do all the thinking for them. Like me, they are prepared to entertain alternative visions for Singapore. It's always been a pleasure to engage them in conversation about the kind of society we aspire to be. Hope never goes out of style.

Cherian George
February 2020

**THE
SINGAPORE
MODEL**

1 . THE AIR-CONDITIONED NATION

Lee Kuan Yew and the politics of comfort and control.

TWENTY-FOUR DAYS BEFORE he was to hand over the government of Singapore to his successor, Lee Kuan Yew toured a newly redesigned park in the civic district and declared with annoyance that the footpaths were too broad. The trees' canopy, he said, would not be wide enough to shade the walkways from the sun. In the prime minister's judgement, the relevant department had not given due consideration to climate control.

It was the first Sunday in November of 1990. Dressed in a polo shirt, tennis shorts and running shoes, Lee was observing his final Tree Planting Day as prime minister by planting a kuras sapling at the Esplanade Park. The workaday ceremony, part of a tradition he had inaugurated in 1971, was witnessed by a small crowd of officials, workers and media. I was covering the event for *The Straits Times*.

The parks commissioner took the opportunity to brief the prime minister on the Esplanade's recent facelift. Lee, occasionally conferring with his wife, looked increasingly agitated. The couple noticed that a row of stately trees that they remembered fondly had been sacrificed in the park's expansion. Furthermore, the prime minister was not convinced that the sapling he had just planted, ringed by a path, would have enough room to grow.

But it was the park's microclimate that he was most concerned about. Unceremoniously taking leave of the parks officials, he and Mrs Lee took an unscheduled walk along the Esplanade, with security officers and reporters hovering. Walking through the Anderson Bridge tunnel and past Victoria Theatre, they stopped by the Singapore River, near the statue of Stamford Raffles. There, the prime minister

gave reporters his verdict. The pavement was so broad, he said, that the trees, even when fully grown, would leave large areas exposed to the sun. He noted that although the sun had nearly set, one could feel the heat through the soles of one's shoes. He squatted suddenly and placed a palm inches off the ground. He could sense the heat radiating from the pavement, he said.

I had expected the assignment to yield some newsworthy nostalgia. But instead of going down memory lane, this walk had ended with the surreal sight of Singapore's paramount leader squatting in front of me and providing tips on thermodynamics and urban design. For a political reporter barely six months into the job, it was also a memorable lesson in the governing style of the People's Action Party (PAP).

Lee's interest in the minutiae of government was not for want of bigger fish to fry. Right up to his last day as prime minister, he was signing off on key decisions, such as a major agreement with Malaysia on railway land. Rather, that Sunday's events were just one intimation of the close attention to detail that Singapore's leaders, and Lee in particular, pay habitually to the country's affairs. And on few details is he as obsessive as the temperature of the environment.

True to form, when the *Wall Street Journal* asked several 20th-century luminaries to pick the most influential invention of the millennium, Lee named the air-conditioner. "The humble air-conditioner has changed the lives of people in the tropical regions," he said. "Before air-con, mental concentration and with it the quality of work deteriorated as the day got hotter and more humid... Historically, advanced civilisations have flourished in the cooler climates. Now, lifestyles have become comparable to those in temperate zones and civilisation in the tropical zones need no longer lag behind."

His own sensitivity to the weather is legendary. It has even provoked scholarly interest. Historian Michael Barr has interpreted Lee's discomfort with Singapore's heat and humidity as connected

to his self-image as a stranded migrant, a descendant of superior stock from the temperate climes of northern China. In his memoirs, Lee recalls his struggle with Singapore's climate when he returned home from his studies in England. It is intriguing to speculate if he would have been as effective and successful a politician in the 1950s and 1960s if he had not managed to exercise some control over his immediate surroundings. Perhaps the Singapore story would have indeed turned out differently if Lee had no air-con.

Still, few historians would agree with Lee's iconoclastic choice, and the air-conditioner is unlikely to join the ranks of the printing press, computer, steam engine, aeroplane, automobile, atom bomb, television and other inventions usually thought of as the most impactful of the last one thousand years. However, what is captivating about the air-conditioner theory is not what it reveals about the machine and the millennium, but what it says about Lee's Singapore. For there are few metaphors that more evocatively crystallise the essence of Singapore politics.

Political scientists and commentators have given the country various labels ranging from an authoritarian democracy to a benevolent dictatorship. Each of these terms is intellectually defensible in its own way, but they are also laden with so much baggage that they tend to provoke knee-jerk reactions, more than they evoke reflection. So, think of Singapore instead as the Air-Conditioned Nation—a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control, where people have mastered their environment, but at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability.

*

An air-conditioned nation is designed, first and foremost, for the comfort of its inhabitants. Lee and the PAP have always believed that what people want most from their government is an environment in which they can pursue prosaic material comforts, rather than live up to high-minded political principles for their own sake. Democracy