ELITES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SINGAPORE*

I. Introduction: Who Are The Elites

The topic on the structure and the role of elites in national development in Singapore is of great interest to social scientists as well as to the general public. This issue, however, is extremely complex, for it involves multidimensional factors and qualitative analysis. Moreover, there is lack of documental data and practically no one has done any systematic study on this topic in Singapore. This paper attempts to make some observations on the role of elites in national development in Singapore and to trace the changes in the structure of the elites, especially the power elite, in the course of development over the past twenty years.

The elite concept did not become widely used in social and political writing until the late nineteenth century, when it was diffused through the sociological theories of elites, notably in the writing of Velfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. The use of the term "elite" by Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Lasswell and Mills suggests various definitions, but there is a fairly clear consensus for its applicability. The most general usage refers to those positions in society which are at the summits of key social structures, e.g., the higher positions in the government, military, politics, religion, economy, education, mass organizations and the professions. In defining these high position holders as the elite, there are, however, two distinct approaches. One focuses exclusively on the power held by the elite as illustrated by the concept of ‘power elite’. The other stresses the functional importance of elites to society at large as elaborated by the concepts of ‘strategic elites’ and ‘functional elites’.

Using Parson’s functional theory, the elite becomes the minority, which is necessary for the functioning of the society. Elite is considered a conglomeration of many small groups, functioning as leaders in different areas of the society, e.g., the cultural elite, the intellectuals, the political elite, the bureaucrats, the business elite, etc. These elites consist of persons who have achieved key functional roles in the society. They qualify

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1. Chan Heng Chee has dealt with some aspects of this topic in 'Politics In An Administrative State,' Occasional Paper Series No. 11, Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, January, 1975.

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for inclusion in elite groups on the basis of their achievements, since it is their functional contributions to the society which are the crucial consideration. The elite structure is a heterogeneous one and this gives rise to the situation in which the power in a modern society is usually shared by different elitistic groups who constrain and support each other and who are selected in a democratic manner.

C. Wright Mills, however, forcefully argues that America is not governed by a heterogeneous elite, but by a homogeneous power elite, which is made up of three dominant groups: leaders of big corporations, the military establishment and the top civil servants.

Mills' thesis of the uniformity and coherence of a nation's power elite is supported by the power system in Thailand. Here, the power elite is made up of the three most significant groups of elite, which are the military, the civil bureaucrats and the business elite. These are the people who control the wealth of the country who have social status and who wield political power. Among these three groups of elite, an alliance has developed. The business elite have sought political protection from the military and the bureaucrats while the latter two groups obtain economic benefit from the former. This power system has seriously been challenged by the newly emerging groups of people since the October uprising in 1973. These newly emerging groups are the people's representatives, the student leaders, the labour leaders and the peasant organizers. As pointed out by Likhit Dhiravegin, however, they are still at an early stage of becoming organized. Structurally they have not yet become fully institutionalized. They could at best be considered interest groups who can play significant roles in influencing the decision-making process.

The Philippines' case demonstrates another type of power system in developing countries. According to a study done by Agpalo, the proclamation of martial law in 1972 has changed the power structure in the Philippines from a fragmental elite to a homogeneous and cohesive elite. Under the martial law regime, the power system is governed by a small power elite of 28 persons, who are the President, 21 cabinet members and six officials with cabinet rank. This power elite is cohesive and homogeneous with regard to their political ideologies, interests and objectives.

In general, the elite is usually distinguished from the masses on the basis of three attributes: wealth, status and power. There are usually small groups of people in a society who control most of the wealth, whose social statuses are on the top stratum and who are directly or indirectly involved in the decision-making process which affects members of the society. This is particularly true in traditional societies. When the society undergoes the process of modernization and industrialization, the attributes of the elite can change. One significant change is the decline of the importance of wealth in determining the elite status in modern societies.

Two important elements of elite status which are frequently overlooked by social scientists are education and social recognition. Without these qualifications, people are hardly able to reach the top of the elite pyramid.

For the purpose of this study, two distinct levels of elite status could be delineated. The lower level of the elite structure is seen to consist of persons who have achieved key functional roles in Singapore society. This level, which includes labour leaders, corporation presidents, members of Parliament, professionals and the like, is defined as the level

S. C. Wright Mills, op. cit.