Effective Governance Forum

The structure of Government

Singapore

Singapore overview

Population	5.6 million[1]
Population per sq km	7,800[2]
Government expenditure	
as % of GDP	12%[3]
Place in World League	
people's trust in government[4]	5 (62%)
people's satisfaction with life[5]	34 (63%)
GDP per capita[6]	13
Legatum Prosperity Index[7]	21
Freedom in the world[8]	89

Note: all data in the report are pre-2020 to exclude the effects of Covid-19

Governance Overview

Singapore is structured according to a classical separation of legislative, executive and legal powers: Parliament, the government and the judiciary.[9] The president is the head of state and is directly elected, although the role is largely ceremonial.

There are three levels of governance in Singapore: national government, town councils and Community Development Councils (CDCs).

Electoral System

All elections are held on a first-past-the-post basis. MPs are elected either to single-member seats for smaller constituencies or group representation for larger constituencies, which have three to six MPs from a single party.[10]

Direction of devolution

Top-down: there is no provision for local government in the Singaporean Constitution. Limited powers have been granted to town councils and Community Development Councils (CDCs) through legislation.

Political style

The conservative People's Action Party (PAP) has won every election in Singapore since independence in 1965. Prime minister Lee Hsien Loong has been prime minister since 2004, following his father, Lee Kwan Yew, who was prime minister from 1959 to 1990.

In the last election, the PAP won 27 of the 29 electoral constituencies. This dominance partly explains why there can be as many as 18 non-elected MPs in Parliament (see Unusual Features below) to ensure some form of opposition.

Income equalisation[11]

There is no single income equalisation fund. Rather, support for low-income citizens is provided through general and sectoral support. General measures include ComCare, which is a long-term assistance programme for poorer citizens who are unable to work, and MediFund, which provides support for medical costs. Sectoral measures are divided into broad transfers and subsidies, targeted assistance, and institutional support, spread across education, employment, healthcare, home ownership and recruitment needs.

Unusual features

There are two further types of non-constituency MPs.
- Up to nine are appointed by opposition parties to ensure a diversity of voices in Parliament;
- and up to nine are nominated by the president to ensure wide community representation in Parliament.

Members of a town council board are the MPs for the constituency. These are compulsory positions that cannot be resigned by serving MPs.

Parliament

Members	101[12]
Population per member	55,000
Full or part time	full time
Pay ratio to national average wage	3.9[13]

Weeks of sittings per year   13[14]

Elections
Elected by   constituencies
Frequency   5 years
Turnout last time   94%[15]

Legislation process[16]
The legislation process in Singapore mirrors that of Westminster. The first reading introduces a bill to Parliament. The second reading is where the first substantive vote takes place on whether to proceed with a bill. At the Committee stage a bill is scrutinised in detail and amendments are made. Third reading is a formality, although bills can be returned to Parliament if further amendments are needed.

Most bills then pass to the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, which assesses whether legislation contains any discriminatory elements and can recommend amendments to MPs, who can either accept such amendments or pass the legislation directly to the president for formal assent.

Responsibilities[17]
There is no constitutional provision for local government in Singapore and all competences are held at national level. Some very limited powers have been devolved to town councils and CDCs (see below).

Of total government expenditure, the amount
spent by national government   99.5%
block grants   0.5%

Source of Funds[18]
raised locally   100%
borrowing   -

Town Councils

Governance
The level of government below national level is town councils, which cover a mixture of individual and combined constituencies. Members of a town council board are the MPs for the constituency. These are compulsory positions that cannot be resigned by serving MPs.

If a council sits within a single-member constituency, the MP for that constituency is also the town council chair. Within multiple or group representation constituencies, the chair is appointed by the constituency MPs.

Town councils

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Number   16
Population, average   350,000

Town council governments   Average
Members   56
Population per member   6,300
Full or part time   part-time
Pay ratio to national average wage   -

Elections
Elected by   Constituencies
Frequency   5 years
Turnout last time   94%

Legislation process
Town councils typically use a series of committees to manage their business, covering finance, maintenance, tenders and contracts, and upgrading.[19]

Responsibilities
Collection of fees and charges; litter; maintenance; parking; planning; property; and public spaces.

Town Council expenditure
as a % of total government expenditure   0.4%[20]

Main Types of taxes
Conservancy and service fees

Source of Funds
Raised locally   73%
Block grants   27%
Mandated grants

Who decides
Tax type: national government
Tax rates: town council

Who collects tax
Town council

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Community Development Councils

Governance
Community Development Councils (CDCs) are managed by the People's Association, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture. Each CDC is run by a council comprised of a chair and at least 12 other members, who perform the administrative functions of the council.

All are appointed by the board of the People's Association, which is chaired by the prime minister. The chair of each CDC is also the mayor for that CDC.

Communities
Number	5
Population, average	1.2 million

Community governments

	Average	High	Low
Members	61	67	50
Population per member	19,700	-	-
Full or part time	Part time		
Pay ratio to national average wage	0.2		
Weeks of sittings per year	varied		

Elections
Elected by	Appointed
Frequency	-
Turnout last time	-

Legislation process
Each CDC has a set of standing committees to manage the business of the councils, and the number and policy areas differ between CDCs.

Responsibilities
CDCs may administer programmes separately or jointly in the following areas: community bonding; local infrastructure; social cohesion; social services; as well as advising the People's Association board on matters of well-being, public services and facilities, and use of public money in the CDC.

CDC expenditure
as a % of total government expenditure	0.07%[21]

Main types of taxes
No tax-raising powers.

Source of funds
Raised locally	73%
Block grants	27%

Further reading

[Constitution of Singapore](#)
[Town Councils Act](#)
[Community Development Council Rules](#)

References

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[19] https://www.mnd.gov.sg/our-work/regulating-town-councils/about-town-councils

[20] Author's calculations based on annual financial reports of Town Councils

[21] https://www.cdc.org.sg/Flipbook/annual_reports/CDC_Annual_Report_FY2017/index.html#p=54