Self-government in 1959

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The election of 30 May 1959

The first election under the new constitution took place on 30 May 1959. It was the first general election held with universal suffrage and compulsory voting. The People's Action Party won 43 of the 51 seats with 54.08 per cent of the vote. About 90.1 per cent of the 586,098 registered voters cast their ballots.[1] The Elections Department states the turnout as 92.9 per cent, although its own count of 527,919 voters gives about 90.1 per cent.[2]

Lee Kuan Yew was sworn in as the first Prime Minister of Singapore on 5 June 1959.[3] The PAP had campaigned as a coalition of English-educated professionals and left-wing trade unionists with strong support in the Chinese-educated population. The coalition held together for only two years, and its internal tensions, which concerned both ideology and the question of merger, shaped the following years of Singapore politics.

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The result worried parts of the business community, which feared a radical government. The new ministers had to persuade investors that they would respect property and contracts. They did so through their actions in office more than through declarations. The government kept the free port, honoured the existing legal order and placed economic development at the centre of its programme.

The constitution of the State of Singapore

The constitution of 1959 gave Singapore full internal self-government. Executive power in domestic matters lay with a Cabinet responsible to an elected Legislative Assembly of 51 members. The British government retained defence and external affairs, while internal security was shared through the Internal Security Council. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara replaced the colonial Governor, the last of whom, Sir William Goode, had taken office on 9 December 1957.[4]

For the commercial life of the port, the most important feature of the constitution was continuity. The courts, the existing laws, the currency and the common law framework of contracts and property remained in place. The English common law heritage traced in Part A and in Chapter I of Part B passed unchanged into the self-governing state. Chapter I of Part F examines how this continuity of the legal order became one of the central assets of the later financial centre.

An economic programme for a small state

The new government inherited an economy dominated by entrepôt trade and by the spending of the British military bases. Its population was growing quickly. The census of 1957 had counted 1,445,929 inhabitants, a figure that rose to 1,646,400 by 1960.[5] Entrepôt trade could not create enough jobs for so many young people entering the labour market. The answer of the government, under its Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee, was industrialisation.

In 1961 a United Nations team led by the Dutchman Albert Winsemius advised the government. Its report, “A Proposed Industrialisation Programme for the State of Singapore”, set out a plan for rapid industrial growth. The Economic Development

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Board was set up in the same year. It replaced the Singapore Industrial Promotion Board of 1957 and received capital of $100 million for the years 1961 to 1964. One of its first tasks was the development of Jurong as an industrial estate. Chapter III of this part examines the EDB and the strategy of industrialisation in detail.[6]

Merger as economic strategy

The industrial strategy of 1959 assumed a market larger than the island. Manufacturing accounted for only 16.9 per cent of real GDP in 1960. Factories producing for a domestic market of fewer than two million people could not reach an efficient scale. The obvious market lay across the causeway in the Federation of Malaya, which had become independent shortly before and was building its own industries behind a tariff wall.[7]

For the leaders of the PAP, merger was therefore an economic necessity as much as a political goal. Lee Kuan Yew explained the reasoning to the Legislative Assembly in July 1963. Singapore depended on Malaya for "forty per cent of its entrepot trade, nearly three-quarters of its water supply", and the link between the two territories was so close that its dissection "would have taxed the skill of the greatest political surgeons".[8] A common market with Malaya would let Singapore's new industries sell across the peninsula. Merger would also end the colonial status of the island, since London was prepared to grant independence through Malaysia more readily than to Singapore alone.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "1959 Singaporean general election" (accessed November 2026): election of 30 May 1959; 51 seats; the PAP "achieved a landslide victory by winning 43 of the 51 seats and securing 54.08% of the popular vote"; first general election with universal suffrage and compulsory voting; 586,098 registered voters; turnout 90.07 per cent. ↩

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2. Elections Department Singapore, “70 Years of Elections: Milestones” (eld.gov.sg): turnout “92.9%”, with 527,919 of 586,098 voters casting ballots. ↩

3. Wikipedia, “1959 Singaporean general election” (accessed November 2026): “Lee was sworn in as Singapore’s first Prime Minister on 5 June 1959”. ↩

4. Wikipedia, “Crown Colony of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): Sir William Goode became Governor on 9 December 1957; Wikipedia, “Self-governance of Singapore” (accessed November 2026), on the Yang di-Pertuan Negara replacing the British Governor. ↩

5. Singapore Department of Statistics, Table Builder, “Indicators On Population, Annual” (table M810001, accessed November 2026): total population 1,445,929 in 1957 and 1,646,400 in 1960. ↩

6. SG101 (Government of Singapore), “1959–1965: Early Economic Strategies” (accessed November 2026): in 1961 a UN team “led by Dutch industrialist Albert Winsemius” advised the government; its report “A Proposed Industrialisation Programme for the State of Singapore”. SG101, “1959–1965: Early Economic Strategies” (accessed November 2026): the EDB was set up in 1961, replacing the Singapore Industrial Promotion Board founded in 1957, with $100 million for 1961 to 1964; Jurong developed as an industrial estate. ↩

7. SG101, “1959–1965: Early Economic Strategies” (accessed November 2026): manufacturing’s share of real GDP was 16.9 per cent in 1960. ↩

8. Lee Kuan Yew, speech on the motion on the Malaysia Agreement in the Legislative Assembly, 30 July 1963, Singapore Government Press Statement MC. JU. 73/63 (PM), National Archives of Singapore, lky19630730.pdf, p. 7: “Forty per cent of its entrepot trade, nearly three-quarters of its water supply”; “would have taxed the skill of the greatest political surgeons”. ↩

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