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The Oxley Road Dispute and Singapore's Future

Life After the Lee Family

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Lee Hsien Loong, [Singapore](#) [3]'s prime minister, is facing the toughest test yet of his 13 years in office. In June, his two siblings publicly accused him of abusing his power to prevent the demolition of the home of their late father—Singapore's first prime minister, [Lee Kuan Yew](#) [4]. Although Lee Hsien Loong will probably emerge from the controversy mostly unscathed, the scandal has increased public scrutiny of Singapore's leaders. That is a good thing, since it could herald a turn toward more transparency and public engagement in the country's politics.

Lee Kuan Yew lived in a prewar bungalow at 38 Oxley Road for most of his life. It was there that the founding members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) met to discuss the formation of the party in 1954. Under the PAP, Singapore gained [independence from Malaysia in 1965](#) [5] and grew from a colonial trading port into a metropolis. As urban development has transformed Singapore's landscape, the house—with its weak foundations, tiled floors, and mid-century furniture—has remained mostly unchanged, a symbol of modern Singapore's origins and of Lee Kuan Yew's commitment to simple living.

Some Singaporeans believe that the house holds important historical value. Yet [Lee Kuan Yew](#) [6] wanted it demolished once Lee Wei Ling, his only daughter, moves out. Lee had little interest in being memorialized by historic sites. (He once told an interlocutor who mentioned that Singaporeans wanted to build monuments in his honor to “remember Ozymandias,” the pharaoh whose ruined statue Percy Shelley commemorated in a poem on the transience of worldly power.) But that aversion was tempered by his belief that the state's interests should take precedence over his own. So he included a caveat in his will: if 38 Oxley Road could not be demolished “as a result of any changes in the law, rules or regulations ... the house [should] never be opened to others except my children, their families, and descendants.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

The Lee siblings' disagreement comes down to their interpretations of this clause. Lee Hsien Loong, the oldest of the three, believes it will be the responsibility of the government to determine the house's fate after his sister no longer lives there. Lee Wei Ling and Lee Hsien Yang, who are the executors of the estate, want to demolish the house once Wei Ling moves out. They have called the prime minister “unfilial” for refusing to commit to

their father's wish. The two decided to publicize the family dispute, they say, because they believed that their brother was circumventing the courts and manipulating state machinery to get his way. They claim Lee Hsien Loong first threatened to have the house registered as a historic site following the reading of Lee Kuan Yew's will in April 2015 [7]. A court granted probate on the will in October 2015, which Lee Hsien Loong did not challenge. Instead, his siblings say, he oversaw the formation of a special ministerial committee in June 2016, staffed by his key allies, charged with considering alternatives to demolition. (The existence of this committee was kept secret from the public until recently; its work is ongoing.) The prime minister, his siblings allege, seeks to exploit Lee Kuan Yew's legacy for his own political benefit and for that of his son, Li Hongyi, a potential successor.

Lee Hsien Loong has denied those allegations. But it has already emerged that Ho Ching [8], Lee Hsien Loong's wife and the head of a state investment company, has in at least one dealing with the Lee Kuan Yew estate acted on behalf of the prime minister's office, even though she holds no official role there. It has also become clear that Lucien Wong [9], whom Lee Hsien Loong appointed as attorney general in January 2017, was formerly the prime minister's personal lawyer, including in disputes with his siblings—an apparent conflict of interest. (Wong, a corporate lawyer, is the first attorney general in Singapore's history without previous experience on the Singaporean bench or in the attorney general's office.) Other conflicts of interest concern the members of the special ministerial committee: its head, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, is the person in whom Lee Hsien Loong confided soon after the reading of Lee Kuan Yew's will; another member, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, provided personal legal advice to Lee Kuan Yew [10] on matters related to his estate while he was alive.

There is little evidence that Li Hongyi or the prime minister's other children have political aspirations. Yet it is clear that Lee Hsien Loong derives some legitimacy from his father's legacy: in the September 2015 general election, held a few months after Lee Kuan Yew's death, the PAP took some 70 percent of the vote—more than it had in any election since 2001.

Filial piety aside, it's not clear why Lee Wei Ling and Lee Hsien Yang are so committed to demolishing the house. Their suspicion of the prime minister's motives may be fueled by sibling rivalry: it is no secret that Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Hsien Loong do not get along. Lee Hsien Yang and his wife, Lee Suet Fern, a corporate lawyer, have decided to leave Singapore because of his stated fear that the state will harass them. (It is unclear when or where they will move.)

So far, Lee Hsien Loong has refrained from suing his siblings, a measure Singapore's leaders have often taken against opponents they believe have defamed them. Instead, on July 3 and July 4, he presented his case to Singapore's rubber-stamp parliament, where the PAP holds 83 of 101 seats. That hearing was livelier than is typical for the parliament, but it produced no major news. The three siblings have since called a truce and pledged to pursue their remaining disagreements privately. But with their respective intentions still unclear, on July 15 some 400 protestors gathered at Singapore's Speakers' Corner, an area set aside for public demonstrations, to call for an independent inquiry into the allegations. The government is unlikely to heed those calls.

LOOK ON MY WORKS, YE MIGHTY, AND DESPAIR

The PAP, which has won every national election since Singapore's independence in 1965, runs a highly centralized state. Institutional checks on the party's power are weak; the Singaporean opposition, civil society, and media are tame; and the president, who is directly elected, is a close ally of the prime minister. Many believe that this centralization has made the government efficient, and most Singaporeans have long accepted the social compact offered by the PAP: limited civil and political liberties in return for economic growth.

Yet the scandal over 38 Oxley Road has revealed the difficulty of accommodating this framework to the demands of reformers—including academics, activists, opposition politicians, and some members of the establishment—who believe Singapore must liberalize to develop ^[11]. It has shown, for instance, that conflicts of interest—an arcane concept in Lee Kuan Yew's time—now offer grounds for attacks against the government that the public considers legitimate. And it has demonstrated that technology has stripped the state of some of its control over public discourse: the prime minister's siblings conducted their campaign on Facebook.

The controversy does not seem likely to upset the PAP's leadership succession plans, which will move the center of Singaporean politics beyond the Lee family for the first time in the country's history. That will bring challenges of its own, however. All six of the candidates shortlisted to take over from Lee Hsien Loong are ethnic Chinese men who have previously held government or military posts (Singapore's multiculturalism is more evident lower in the official hierarchy). Yet each has a separate base of support, and whoever becomes the next prime minister will lack the broad backing enjoyed by the Lees. As a result, the dissipation of executive power will continue.

The episode at 38 Oxley Road has given Singaporeans occasion to reflect on Lee Kuan Yew's legacy. Singapore's first prime minister deserves much of the credit for his country's success. Yet more citizens are growing interested in his illiberal actions and are coming to recognize that other personalities and factors were also responsible for their country's transformation. Such realizations should give Singaporeans confidence about their country's post-Lee future.

It may be decades before Lee Wei Ling moves out of the Oxley Road house and a decision on its fate is made. If the controversy leads to more political engagement, transparency, and pluralism ^[12], it could help prepare Singapore for the decentralization of power that could follow the end of Lee Hsien Loong's tenure. That would give Singaporeans reason to look back on the episode fondly. But if the dispute re-emerges and Singapore is unable to transition smoothly into its post-Lee future, it will prove a cautionary tale about the dangers of investing too much power in one family.

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[2] <https://www.amazon.com/Floating-Malayan-Breeze-Malaysia-Singapore/dp/9888139312>

[3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/regions/singapore>

[4] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1994-03-01/conversation-lee-kuan-yew>

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[7] <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/pm-lee-threatened-to-gazette-38-oxley-road-lee-wei-ling-8995212>

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