

Election Rallies: Performances in Dissent, Identity, Personalities and Power

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INTRODUCTION

Election rallies are ephemeral performances. Staged at every election cycle, they animate the hearts of Singaporeans, and then disappear after precious few days of campaigning leaving nothing but the echo of sound, fury and possibilities. It is at the election rally where the speaker performs, unedited and unsupervised, for the favour of Singaporeans, and where the Singaporean, driven by the twin demands of curiosity and affirmation, goes to seek herself in the midst of strangers. At the rally everyone, whether student, taxi driver, or manager, becomes, just briefly, the object of the speaker's affections, the object of desire who may return the affection or spurn the suitor. Election rallies are political performances alien to other resolutely Singaporean spaces like the mainstream media or public forums where thick decorum and practiced deference conspire to neutralise the visceral and intuitive.

There were a total of 67 rallies over an eight day period from 28 April to 5 May across the island. Being the incumbent, the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) staged 26 rallies all over the island. Meanwhile the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) nine rallies; the Workers' Party (WP) and the National Solidarity Party (NSP) eight each; the Singapore People's Party (SPP) six; the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) three; and the Reform Party (RP) seven. The combination of funding limitations and strategic planning meant that most Opposition parties held only one rally a night, thus contributing to the larger crowds in comparison to the PAP rallies. The crowd turnout at PAP rallies usually ranged from a few hundreds to a couple of thousands. At Opposition rallies, most parties attracted audiences of 5,000 and above, with the WP being able to command 20,000 to 30,000 people. It had always been conventional wisdom, until now, to explain the crowd discrepancy between PAP and Opposition rallies as the result of curiosity of the new and the alternative, and to dismiss the crowd size at the latter as an inaccurate reflection of voting patterns. In the 2011 General Elections however, conventional wisdom, along with the climate of fear, took a back seat as a tide of ground sentiments nurtured over recent years swept across the political landscape to give the PAP its lowest share of the popular vote since independence.

The 2011 General Elections saw the wide usage of new media. Rally speeches were streamed immediately after 10pm when rallies ended into the comfort of bedrooms on platforms such as Youtube and RazorTV. However, while Youtube and RazorTV multiplied the viewership many times over, allowing people to watch more than one party's rally each night, they were poor documentations of the larger theatre that unfolded in the open fields and football stadiums. Drama and performance were not confined to the stage but prevalent in the heaving mass of bodies that jostled for space. This chapter seeks to document four types of performances that played out in the rallies. Dissent, identity, personalities and power – they were performed by the speakers as well as the crowd who responded to them. The section on dissent explores public anger in Opposition rallies, the section on identity seeks to understand the cultural identities in the different rally crowds, while the section on personalities argues that only Opposition rallies threw up strong personalities with forceful messages that resonated with the public, and finally, the section on power looks at a PAP rally to highlight the incumbent's understated influence and reach over the grassroots.

PERFORMING DISSENT

The Opposition rallies, above other medium, became key focal points for the crystallizing and harnessing of voter anger. Perennial concerns such as the high cost of living, widening wage gap, high ministerial salaries and liberal immigration policies, all of which were given an airing in the 2006 General Elections, were joined by more recent criticisms like the raising of GST from 5 per cent to 7 per cent; the overblown budget of the Youth Olympics Games in 2010 and the absence of a detailed breakdown of the expenditure; terrorist suspect Mas Selamat's escape in 2008; the affordability of public flats for young first-time buyers; and the floods in Bukit Timah and downtown Orchard Road. Underlining these criticisms was the complaint that the PAP ministers had grown arrogant and had lost touch with the people, evidenced in the way they persisted in merely reiterating the rationale for public policies and justified themselves by exhorting citizens to look at the party's track record in delivering the material. Heightening the fast souring public mood were Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's warning that Aljunied voters would have to 'repent' for the next five years if they voted WP¹ and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's series of unhelpful remarks including the unsolicited observation that his ex-Principal Private Secretary and SDP candidate, Tan Jee Seng, left the civil service only because he could not make the grade as Permanent Secretary after Goh had himself called for 'a clean and fair fight'². It was against this backdrop of discontent that the rallies were staged

Open dissent or defiance, though not unheard of, continues to be a marginal activity in Singapore³. Unlike more liberal democracies where acts of civil disobedience are a legitimate part of the political process, such acts are politically stigmatised. Other traditional public platforms for dissent like the mainstream media are not available in Singapore and in the absence of press competition or a diverse array of media, dissent is largely purged from the public sphere.

In contrast, Opposition rallies of all stripes are marked by the common characteristic of open dissent, defiance and anger towards the ruling party. Spontaneous boos rise to greet the mention of any unpopular minister with Mah Bow Tan and Wong Kan Seng drawing the most vitriol. Opposition candidates shrewdly bait the crowd with acronyms like HDB, ERP, MRT, COE and GST, and regardless of the more centrist stance of the WP, the more liberal slant of the SDP, or the less ideologically distinguishable parties like the NSP, SPP, SDA or RP, election rallies were spaces where dissent had a Singaporean face.

Workers' Party Rally, Hougang Field, 28 April 2011⁴

I arrived at Hougang field at 7:00 pm. By then there was a large crowd sitting in front of the stage. Milling with the crowd were uniformed police officers as well as undercover ones (who had earpieces which made them pretty obvious). The crowd was generally Chinese, a good mix of men and women, largely between 40-60 years of age, working and lower middle class. Older women with brown highlighted hair and tattooed eyebrows, young

¹ *The Straits Times*, 'Not End of the World if PAP Loses Aljunied: MM Lee', 30 April 2011.

² Muhammad Fahmi Zainal Abidin, 'Were SM Goh's Remarks Personal?', *The Straits Times*, Forum Page, 3 May 2011.

³ Russell Heng Hiang Khng, 'Suffer the Rebellious Children: The Politics of Remaking Singapore and the Remaking of Singapore Politics', in *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010).

⁴ Author's field journal.

couples with iPhones, and Ah Peks in loose short sleeved shirts mingled easily amidst the cigarette smoke that hung heavily in the night air.

Throughout the speeches, volleys of abuse shot out. 'Pay and Pay... until bankrupt!', 'They are useless! Kick them out!', 'Million dollar ministers... no use!' One man, weather beaten and sinewy, clad in an oversized T-shirt, shrieked 'They are only good at sucking blood!' His spittle glistened under the harsh light.

There was discernable discontent and injustice over the way they had been treated by the incumbent. The shouts, even screams, of anger, especially over issues like upgrading and cost of living, were spontaneous and deeply heartfelt. This palpable anger, however, was set against a festive mood. Small plastic WP flags and umbrellas were waved freely, broad smiles were in abundance, and the cheering felt like something that Hougang residents needed to do to remind themselves of who they are and what they have been through.

Such open displays of dissent and anger at Opposition rallies gave the ruling party food for thought. It was one thing to acknowledge the higher levels of dissent and anger towards the PAP in cyberspace where anonymity is de rigueur, it was quite another to see such dissent and anger expressed so openly by real people oblivious to the cameras pointing their way. It was almost puzzling that an efficient and clean government that had delivered spectacular economic growth and material affluence to its citizens could still be the brunt of such wrath. It was probably *because* of this economic growth – a whopping 14.5 percent in 2010 - so eye-catching in print, that had desensitised the PAP to the quiet everyday desperation of piling utility bills, shrinking food portions in hawker centres, and the dismal free-fall of value in the EZ-Link card every time it was tapped on the entry reader. The high growth just did not trickle down to ordinary citizens fast enough.

PERFORMING IDENTITY

Pushing through tightly packed bodies at rallies, one quickly becomes aware of the distinctive crowds that some parties attract. Cultural archetypes take flesh. Not surprising given that parties were formed by specific cultural and socio-economic groups and had specific messages which resonated with different demographic. However, the shifting demographics of Singapore society and the ideological evolution of political parties often results in heterogeneous rally crowds which may contain socio-cultural patterns as reflections of the party's genesis.

WP's strong ethnic Chinese following rooted in working and lower-middle class support is now increasingly complemented by better educated supporters and candidates. The party's traditional support base of young disenfranchised working class Chinese men of the late 1980s and early 1990s marginalised by globalization and national policies remain. At the rallies these men, now middle aged, responded instinctively to WP's Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang and Hokkien-speaking WP veteran, Lim Ee Ping, and they to them. But this disenfranchisement was no longer confined to the working class Chinese male of yesteryear. It was all pervasive from the bespectacled accountant, the Malay engineer, the mid-level civil servant, to the logistics executive standing around me. Disenfranchisement had gone middle class. And it was WP's pitch perfect tone at the rallies that drew them in. WP speakers, in practiced turns, oscillated between commiserating with their disaffection and painting a picture of fairer, more equitable Singapore. The message proved too good to resist.

The party with perhaps the most distinctive crowd was SDP. SDP's history of civil disobedience and public protests, together with its focus on broader concerns like human rights and personal freedom issues helped to sharpen the contours of the crowd it attracted to its rallies. For example, its more

progressive stance on issues like minimum wage, distribution of wealth, and sexuality, not to mention its clear party branding on platforms like the new media, attracted a more liberal, well educated, cosmopolitan and younger English-speaking crowd. Even the party's paraphernalia had a softer twist – Danny the Democracy Bear, a little stuffed toy, was quickly sold out at all its rallies. To my knowledge it was the only party that sold posters of its candidates at their rallies. It was not uncommon to spot theatre actors and writers in the SDP crowd. Predominantly English-speaking middle class, the rally crowd was largely a demographic that had benefited most the political decision to make English the lingua franca, suffered most from the bilingual education policy, and drew the most angst from state censorship. Again, this demographic reaped the leisure benefits from the 1990s onwards of the liberalising cultural scene where its more liberal position on sexuality and human rights found resonance in the arts.

There were several familiar faces at SDP rallies. They were the same ones who were mobilized against the Christian takeover of the women's group AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) in 2009. Some of them were wearing pink T-shirts, an obvious nod to the Pink Dot event, a local annual gay awareness community movement. It was perhaps SDP's gay-friendly stance, together with a Youtube video clip where Vincent Wijesingha was identified as 'Singapore's next gay MP', that prompted the PAP team from Holland-Bukit Timah GRC to issue a media statement asking if SDP would pursue a 'gay agenda' if elected to Parliament. This was in all probability calculated to appeal to the significant portion of upper-middle, probably Christian conservative, class in the constituency. As such, the SDP rallies saw a disproportionately larger gay-friendly crowd.

The NSP rally crowd saw a general contrast of Chinese who were more comfortable in their mother-tongue and a younger, more curiosity-driven contingent. The former formed the mainstay of their support base while the latter were attracted to the party's star, Nicole Seah. At the NSP rally in Whampoa the crowd of younger Singaporeans toggled in Converse shoes, Giordano or Hang Ten tops, some with big chunky watches, came alive with the appearance of Seah who brought the night's proceeding to a close. The otherwise staid rally began to take on shades of a pop concert with yelps and screams. But the young were not just there to gaze at a pretty face, they were there to see the best in themselves. Addressing PAP candidate Tin Pei Ling's election promise to keep Macpherson hawkers' prices down for six months, Seah retorted 'This to me speaks of a government that cannot see the root of the problem. You tell the hawkers to keep their prices down but you let rentals go up? You don't keep a cap on their raw materials and you expect them to keep the price like that?' With these words Seah elevated herself, in the eyes of the crowd, from a mere social media sensation to a rational, thinking politician who happened to be 24 years old. The boy next to me, not more than 20 himself, raised his arms above his head to clap. It was not a frenzied applause but a slow and deliberate one. His eyes did not veer from the stage and each smack of his palms was heavy with conviction. It is uncertain as to how Seah would develop with NSP, and if she would contest in the next elections, but for that brief nine days of campaigning she came to epitomise all that was good about the Singaporean youth.

RP rallies, on the other hand, had less of a youthful following but there was a larger ethnic Indian crowd. It is uncertain if the Jeyaretnam brand could account for the larger Indian following but as the youngest political party in the elections, it was clear that RP revolved around Kenneth Jeyaretnam. The RP rallies at Clementi stadium drew average crowds of 2,000. The slate of RP candidates for West Coast and Ang Mo Kio Group Representative Constituency (GRC) comprised unfamiliar faces, some of whom were not even in the party before Nomination Day on 27 April.

All in all, through the superficial heterogeneity of the rally crowds, the contours of cultural identity could be discerned. It would be an overstatement to say that different parties sought to attract

specific groups. However, factors like the candidate's pet causes and the party's ideological stance played a part in gravitating like-minded Singaporeans towards different parties.

PERFORMING PERSONALITIES

One of the distinguishing features of the 2011 General Elections was the stark difference in the way the Opposition and the PAP ran their campaigns. By all counts, the PAP had a patchy campaign. The politicking began with the PAP's introduction of candidate Tin Pei Ling. Unfortunately, the PAP could not respond to criticisms of Tin because they did not come from Opposition parties but the Singaporean public, thus leaving no visible target for the incumbent to train its sights on. The ruling party then proceeded to lose the moral high ground with its public statement on the 'Vincent video', leaving many to question the PAP's 'smear tactics'.⁵ From then on, along with the series of remarks from MM Lee and SM Goh, the PAP was on the back foot, constantly defending itself against challenges to its moral legitimacy and charges of arrogance. Never once during the campaign period was the ruling party able to seize the initiative over issues or control the debate. Its most prescient moment came when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong publically apologised at the Boat Quay afternoon rally on 3 May. It was a masterful performance of humility and self-awareness calculated to stem the further loss of votes. Nevertheless, aside from the PM's apology, the PAP failed to leverage on the unique features of the rally for its advantage. The live crowd, the raw vulnerability of the speaker, the platform for a simple message, the manipulation of the crowd's mood – all these were available to PAP candidates to turn the campaign around. Instead, it was left to the Opposition parties to exploit this space with maximum effect.

One of the revelations of the campaign was the emergence of strong personalities from the Opposition and the messages of idealism and ideals they brought with them. In general, Opposition rallies tended to dwell on the themes of claiming ownership over Singapore, a more equitable or fairer country, more accountability and confidence in the young. The two rally speakers most persistent with these themes were the SDP's Wijesingha and WP's Pritam Singh. Wijesingha, head of TWC2 (Transient Workers Count 2), would have been no stranger to local civil society activists. He was however a relatively new face to most Singaporeans. Wijesingha's rally speeches explored freedom issues, raising wage inequality, but most powerfully, addressed the need to stand up to the government's politics of fear. This last point struck a chord with many. His vivid analogy of government threats being like a snake in a darkened room which would be revealed as nothing more than a coil of rope if only people switched on the lights neatly captured the *zeitgeist* of a generation that was coming of age. Wijesingha connected with a well-travelled generation that did not appreciate the government's politics of crisis. By refusing to attack the PAP candidates for their 'smear tactics' at the rallies, Wijesingha was able to publicly perform humility and magnanimity. And in doing so, distinguished himself from his PAP counterparts.

Pritam Singh came out of the blue. Without any previous public role, Singh emerged as one of WP's most charismatic speakers. His habit of addressing specific groups of people – the youth, civil servants, Aljunied voters, Malays and so on – in his speeches not only help crystallise his message but also made it more personal. Singh tackled the myth of the irreplaceable minister, the potential of the Singaporean youth, and rounded up with a healthy dose of patriotism with the national pledge on 5 May. All this made for a compelling performance of ideals and idealism. From his first rally speech in Serangoon stadium on 29 April, such was his impact on the live crowd and online that

⁵ Vincent Tan, 'PAP need not have resorted to 'smear tactics'', *The Straits Times*, Forum, 28 Apr 2011.

he was closing WP rallies just a few nights later – unheard of for a newcomer. Singh’s connection with the crowd, especially the younger voters, was clear as the buzz and anticipation rose up several notches whenever he took to the lectern. Both Wijesingha and Singh, together with Seah, drew on themes that stirred the imagination and excited rally audiences. Collectively, they extended open invitations to fellow Singaporeans to shape the country’s future.

In contrast, the PAP was left defending the status quo at its rallies. The ruling party’s themes of a stable government, a stellar track record, estate upgrading (as well as other material gains), and the political dangers of a ‘rojak’ government did not stir as much excitement. These messages were well-worn and unsuitable for a live audience, with many PAP candidates speaking rigidly from their scripts as though they were making a policy announcement. Even with the friendly mainstream media and the ubiquity of Youtube, no strong or compelling personality who could inspire Singaporeans to fantasise of a better country stood out from the slate of new PAP candidates. None managed to exploit the theatre of the rally.

PERFORMING POWER

With Opposition rallies typically drawing larger and more vocal crowds, it is easy to dismiss PAP rallies as mere sideshows for two reasons. First, it is understood that the PAP’s silent voting bloc may not be as enamoured with muddy fields and squeezing up against strangers as Opposition supporters. Secondly, much of the PAP’s views on national issues like cost of living, housing affordability and immigration would have already been thoroughly covered by the mainstream press well before campaigning began, and attending its rallies would thus be a case of *déjà vu*. However, such a dismissal would blinker one to the enormous reach and power that the PAP has over the grassroots, particularly the Residents’ Committee (RC).

Introduced in 1978, RCs are essentially run by volunteers who cover different geographical zones within HDB estates. A GRC may have four, five or more RC zones within its area. RC leaders typically have an intimate understanding of the neighbourhood in terms of residents’ satisfaction with an array of issues such as municipal affairs, law and order concerns, transportation and accessibility and so on. And although RCs are officially non-partisan, it is not uncommon for RC leaders or members to be card-carrying PAP members. RCs and their leaders work closely with their Members of Parliament (MPs) over issues like municipal feedback, ground response to unpopular public policies, handling of logistics at Meet-the-People sessions, as well as organising other MP-related events such as ceremonial shows during ethnic festivals and MP’s walkabouts. Given the long incumbency of many PAP MPs, it is natural that they form strong working and personal relations with RC leaders. In addition to strong personal relations, RC leaders enjoy perks such as choice of schools for their children, priority when it comes to buying HDB flats and waiver of parking fees in HDB estates.

To be sure, RC leaders and members are told to support their PAP MPs in their personal capacity. They are told not to don RC T-shirts during walkabouts or when helping in the campaigning. However, given the personal bonds built over the years as well as the blurring of lines between ruling party and RC, as well as other grassroots organizations such as the Citizens’ Consultative Committee (CCC), and the People’s Association (PA), it is not uncommon for RC members to involve themselves in party activities. Together with the large number of PAP cadres and grassroots activists, PAP election rallies offer a rare glimpse of the party’s powerful machinery at work. For many Singaporeans, this blurred line between incumbent party and grassroots organizations is all too often camouflaged by everyday hegemony, and it is on rare occasions like this that it becomes clear how deeply intertwined they are.

Unlike any Opposition rallies, the PAP ones were the only ones to have hired coaches to bring people to rally sites. Most of these were older men and women. In addition, they were provided dinner, usually rice in white Styrofoam boxes. An elderly woman in her 60s revealed that she was persuaded by an RC leader to attend the rally at Clementi field, and she did not mind as she had nothing else to do.⁶ The PAP's deep pockets also allowed it to offer hired plastic chairs at all its rallies, something no other party could provide. Another distinguishing feature of the PAP rallies was the number of individuals running around organising and coordinating the crowd. These individuals, most probably RC leaders, were busy distributing whistles and plastic clappers, arranging for groups to hold up placards to cheer on the candidates, ensuring these groups were in the cameras' line of sight, encouraging people to sit closer together and so on. Unlike Opposition rallies where the crowd grew organically and cheered spontaneously, these coordinators left little to chance in the attempt to get the most out of the available crowd. But they went about their task with no airs or expectation, just old-fashioned doggedness and smiles aplenty. It was through them that the PAP's power and influence shone.

PAP Rally, Clementi Field, 4 May 2011⁷

The rally did not start promptly. At 7:00 pm, the field was still bare, with only police officers and workers setting up plastic chairs to be seen. I hung around Block 310, beside the field, to get a sense of the audience. A group of women walked by and I heard one remark 'Eeeww, field so wet, can sit here or not? [void deck]' Not ardent fans I guess. By 7:20pm, the crowd started to stream in. A long trail of older women slowly made their way to the rows of plastic seats carrying packets of food.

At 7:30pm two emcees appeared on stage. After some Channel 8 style banter with the 200 or so crowd, one of them announced to the surrounding flats: 'Residents up there, if you can hear us, please come down and hear our views!' They proceeded to do a roll call of the RC zones in order to excite the blank looking faces: 'Zeng Hua RC, are you here tonight? Yuhua RC, let me hear you screeeeeeeam! Bukit Timah RC make some noisssssee!' There was scattered clapping here and there but most were playing with their mobile phones.

Some of the women who were bussed in had brought placards. I overheard an older woman in her 60s telling a younger one in Hokkien: 'Get the younger ones to do it [hold up the placard], I'm so old.' The younger woman replied 'You don't have to hold it up the whole rally, only at some moments.' The older woman shrugged and continued eating from her white styrofoam box. I asked them to hold up the placard for a picture. They did so readily but one yelled 'Don't take my face.' All the placards looked as though they were made by the same person. They looked more like those found in pop concerts waved by adolescent girls. None possessed any wit or spontaneity - certainly not in the class of the 'MyLow' or 'Driving License' ones at Workers' Party rallies.

A slate of about four or five guest speakers spoke before the PAP candidates appeared. They were made up of retired secondary school principals and veteran grassroots leaders who did not address any campaign issues. Instead they recounted anecdotes from their past - how poor sanitation was when they were young, heavy floods, crumbling infrastructures, basically how bad life was before the PAP changed things for the better. Most spoke in

⁶ Author's field journal.

⁷ Ibid.

Mandarin and Chinese dialects. All seemed rather genuine until one English-speaking grassroots leader, the youngest of the lot, came along. 'The opposition wants CHANGE! Change is not important! More important is IMPROVEMENT! IMPROVEMENT is not CHANGE!' By this time the crowd had grown to about 800–1,000. People went around distributing whistles and plastic clappers to the audience. I got myself a nice green whistle.

The Holland-Bukit Timah candidates arrived at 8.15pm. The emcee asked everyone to 'welcome them to you' and the whistles and cheers duly went up. But looking around, the noise was only generated by small pockets of people in the audience while the vast majority just stared blankly.

What was noticeable was that unlike Opposition rallies, the PAP did not sell any party paraphernalia. No little flags, pens, or umbrellas. Not even flyers or *Petir* to profile their candidates. One suspects that it either did not need to raise funds or was afraid that people might deface the PAP symbol - probably both. The consequence of this was a rather disconnected, cold but well organized rally.

CONCLUSION

As I was swept along by the human flood at Serangoon stadium on the last rally night, I realised that something in the local political landscape had changed irrevocably. At that point we did not yet know if the WP 'A' team could wrestle Aljunied from the PAP. I SMSed a friend on the WP slate to ask if he was confident. His reply was short – 'No'. 'Doesn't matter. Things will never be the same', I SMSed back. The faces all around me were young, fresh and etched with optimism. There were bitter anti-PAP calls here and there, but the general mood was one of hope and the desire for change. This desire could not be denied, regardless of the final vote count.

More than any other space, it was at the rally where Singaporeans came of age. So often the crime scene for slander and defamation suits, the rallies of 2011 were marked with mature discourse. The candidates spoke with restraint and control because they knew that wild accusations or unfounded allegations were the fastest way to lose votes, not to mention personal savings. It was at the rally where the myth of the apathetic Singaporean was dispelled. Fathers with children on their shoulders, grannies with umbrellas to support their weight, teenage girls in school uniform – they were there because each felt a personal stake in the outcome. It was at the rally where Singaporean wit and humour flourished. The home-made placards from 'MyLow', 'Driving Licence' to Kate Spade mock-ups, the spontaneous retorts from the crowd, the political jabs candidates threw at each other – they helped weave politics into local popular culture. More than any other General Elections, 2011 was the year that the election rally became a place where Singaporeans gathered to commiserate, participate and dream of a better Singapore.