

New Normal Or Anomaly?

2015 General Election and PAP's Electoral Landslide

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Poll Puzzle

In the lead up to Singapore's September 2015 General Election (GE), many political pundits and punters¹ expected the ruling PAP (People's Action Party) to arrest its decline in the popular vote (from 75.3% in 2001 to 66.6% in 2006 and dipping again to 60.1% in 2011) or even win a few percentage points on account of the convergence of favourable and unique factors. But the PAP shocked many (including itself) by capturing a larger than expected 69.9% of the popular votes and retaking a single-member constituency from the opposition Workers Party (WP).² Earlier, many analysts saw two unique trump cards of ruling party: the seven-day national mourning following the demise of Singapore's Founding Father and ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015; and the Golden Jubilee celebration of the city-state in August the same year.

These two X-factors cannot be underestimated in their ability to stir the patriotic and nostalgic sentiments of many voters during the election. An unprecedented 1.5 million people thronged the streets and queued patiently braving sun and rain to pay their last respects to the late statesman.³ Any onlooker would reasonably have thought that this public

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- 1 Apparently, heavy betting took place in every Singapore GE. The Internet Era has made this ubiquitous in the city-state during recent general elections.
 - 2 There were also critics who sanguinely anticipated that the opposition parties (especially the Workers Party) had the political momentum since GE 2011 and two by-elections in Hougang and Ponggol East SMC and would win more seats in GE 2015.
 - 3 Some mourners queued resolutely for more than ten hours during the funeral wake despite tropical downpour, high humidity and the scorching sun. The wake was

grieving was state-orchestrated, given its scale and intensity, but this was no rehearsed spectacle. The citizenry's outpouring of grief and gratitude was spontaneous, heartfelt and genuine. Indeed, the overwhelming turnout was unprecedented and took almost everyone (including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his top colleagues) by surprise. What we saw was a cathartic event that ended an era for many Singaporeans as they deeply reflected on the meaning of nationhood—its foundation, values, struggles, material success and change.

At the 50th National Day celebrations, Singaporeans were reminded of Lee Kuan Yew's historical narrative of Singapore vaulting from the third world to the first in a single generation—the affluent but resource-poor city-state suffering from acute vulnerability and struggle for survival in an uncertain world sandwiched between less than friendly neighbours, and the need for a time-tested and battle-proven PAP to always lead and govern. PM Lee Hsien Loong's choice of September 11 for Polling Day was a subliminal reminder to Singaporeans of 'black swan' events and their country's vulnerability to jihadist terrorism.

The euphoria of tiny Singapore having 'made it' despite the odds contrasted starkly with the on-going crisis of governance, corruption, elite-infighting and ethnic tension in Malaysia (the country which booted Singapore out in 1965); and the fragmented and corrupt governance of Indonesia too inept to address the recurring haze (euphemism for the poisonous smog) from its burning peat lands and plantations that enveloped Singapore and the region for months, in 2015. Indeed, the miseries of Singapore's immediate neighbours fed right into the Golden Jubilee's historical narrative and the PAP's national campaign for GE 2015. In September 2015, many voters were far more upset with Indonesia's callousness, arrogance and indifference to its neighbours' plight,⁴ than with

opened 24 hours to accommodate the massive turnout, and thousands patiently stood in line long into the wee hours of the morning.

- 4 Many Singaporeans were outraged by Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Karla's snide and appalling remark that Singapore should be grateful to Indonesia for eleven months of good air. See "Indonesia's Vice President Jusuf Kalla criticises neighbours for grumbling about haze", *The Straits Times*, 5 Mar 2015.

the PAP. Indeed, the electorate's palpable and burning anger toward the PAP in GE 2011 had mostly dissipated, as I will later explain.

Chapter Outline and Conclusion at Outset

I begin by examining the hallmarks of 2015 GE campaign—the political parties and their candidates, and the electorate—to understand why the PAP defied political market expectations. We might ask: Was GE 2015 a turning point for the PAP from seemingly inexorable electoral decline, toward a 'new normal' of PAP resurgence? Is it a re-established Gramscian hegemony based on the consent of a generally conservative and pragmatic middle class satisfied with material benefits and internalizes the PAP values and narrative of 'good' governance, nation building, acute vulnerability and survival?⁵ Or is GE 2015 an anomalous result, given the never-to-be-repeated X-factors of Lee Kuan Yew's death and Singapore's Golden Jubilee? I will then consider in brief, key battlegrounds of GE 2015: Aljunied GRC (Group Representation Constituency); East Coast GRC; Ponggol East SMC (Single Member Constituency); and Potong Pasir SMC.

I conclude that the PAP's dominance remains very much entrenched. For the foreseeable future, general elections in Singapore will not be about replacing the PAP as the ruling party but more of a national referendum and bellwether of national sentiments about the PAP's performance. This is because the ruling party has strong, adaptable and renewable leadership, hardworking MPs (Members of Parliament) and tremendous influence on grassroots organisations.⁶ The opposition parties remain weak and

5 On the Singapore anomaly which defies Western social science expectations that an affluent society with a burgeoning middle class will invariably become more democratic, see Lam Peng Er, 'Singapore: Rich State, Illiberal Regime' in James W Morley (ed.), *Driven by Growth: Political Change in the Asia-Pacific Region* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) pp.255-274.

6 At the grassroots, the PAP relies on local organisations such as the Citizens' Consultative Committees, Management Committees (of community centres) and Residents' Committees led by local notables and advised by MPs from the ruling party. The PAP does not have strong, autonomous party branches at the grassroots. PAP critics would say that these grassroots organisations are funded by the People's Association (Prime Minister's Office) from taxpayers' money for the PAP's political benefit.

fragmented (with the exception of the Workers Party). The electorate is largely conservative, pragmatic and savvy and is adept at extracting benefits for itself in a 'transactional' democracy. This majority adopts a calibrated and hard-nosed approach in general elections: it rewards the ruling party if it performs; and punishes it if it fails.⁷ However, this electorate wants the PAP to remain in power but with an opposition to check it in Parliament.

If this interpretation is correct, the main consideration for Singapore's middle ground electorate appears to be based on performance: it will reward the ruling PAP and the opposition parties if they perform credibly. Support for political parties is based on their performance in Parliament and in tending to the needs of residents in the local wards. They will not vote in mediocre opposition candidates on the basis of abstract notions of democracy, pluralism and checks and balances or even just to have an opposition in Parliament. Indeed, the middle ground is not driven by post-material or pluralist calls for more oppositional voices and democratization in an increasingly affluent society. Instead, it inheres a 'transactional' approach to governance which values good performance of the respective parties and obtains for the electorate the greatest gains from inter-party competition. While Singaporean electoral behaviour may be seen by some as materialistic, base and bereft of idealism, it is little different from how self-interested voters in the US, Western Europe, India, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan cast their ballots.

In the next GE, the dominant segment of the electorate will probably continue applying the 'reward and punishment' strategy although the social media's scare mongering that PAP will lose big in GE 2015 will probably *not* be taken seriously. Arguably, this 'fear' factor prevailed among the conservative segment of the electorate in GE2015 who over-compensated by giving the PAP a more resounding victory than it might otherwise have enjoyed.⁸

7 A great challenge for opposition parties in Singapore is whether they can attract electoral support beyond protest votes against the PAP. A focus on catchy manifestoes, party policies and electoral rallies is also inadequate. There is no substitute for the recruitment of attractive and credible candidates, and sustainable grassroots activities.

8 Han Fook Kwang of *The Straits Times* opined: 'Of all the many explanations for the

GE 2015 Campaign

The long campaign for GE 2015 began shortly after GE 2011 in which the PAP did poorly. The ruling party was shocked by the fierce anger of the electorate over various issues. These included: the government's liberal immigration policy (which led to foreign competition with the locals for physical public space, amenities, houses and jobs); the escalating prices of public housing; the rise in the cost of living; PAP politicians enjoying the highest ministerial pay in the world (in contrast to the daily struggles of ordinary citizens); and frequent breakdown in public transportation—all 'bread-and-butter' issues. In the midst of GE 2011, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made an unprecedented apology to the electorate and promised to do better if elected.

The ruling party was in a crisis⁹ as it conducted its post-mortem of GE2011. In a cabinet reshuffle, PM Lee sacrificed three unpopular ministers (portfolios of Home Affairs, Transport, and National Development [public housing]) who were perceived by the electorate have been delinquent in their duties. PAP Ministers and MPs intensified their walk-about in their constituencies, and many MPs made numerous house visits in the years leading up to the September 2015 GE. With the exception of the WP, the opposition parties did not have a systematic outreach to woo ordinary voters at the grassroots. PM Lee launched Our Singapore Conversation in August 2012 to get a better sense of Singaporean aspirations. This 'national

vote swing towards the People's Action Party (PAP) in the General Election, one stands out for what it says about the electorate. This is that voters, fearing the ruling party might be booted out of office, turned out in numbers to prevent the unthinkable from happening. The fear of a freak election result almost created another freak to wipe out the opposition'. Han continued: 'There was another fear, not as frightening as the first, but where the danger was clearer. This is the possibility of the PAP losing seats and votes, not enough to fall as a government, but enough to weaken it and cause Singapore the country to suffer the consequences. Unlike the first fear, this does not require voters to make such a great leap of the imagination. But at which point - how many seats did voters fear the PAP might lose - to get them to hit the panic button? Seven? Ten? Twenty?'. See 'What caused the GE vote swing?', *The Straits Times*, 20 Sep 2015.

- 9 This sense of crisis was aggravated by the fact that Tony Tan, the PAP's preferred candidate for the 2012 Presidential Election, won with only 35% of the votes. The PAP also lost the 2012 Hougang by-election and the 2013 Ponggol East by-election to the WP.

conversation' exercise ended a year later. At least 47,000 Singaporeans from various walks of life participated in this feedback mechanism. Simply put, the PAP worked hard to reconnect with the masses.

PM Lee made decisive changes in public policy to appease the electorate. These included: reduction in ministerial pay; tighter restrictions on the numbers of foreign migrants (especially permanent residents) and temporary workers; ramping up the construction of public housing (to moderate prices and to reduce the waiting time for Singaporean applicants); and putting more buses on the roads. Though Singaporeans were inconvenienced, annoyed and flabbergasted by periodic breakdown in the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) train system after 2011, they were realistic enough to know that structural and engineering problems could not be rectified overnight. They knew that Herculean efforts were being made to change 188,000 ageing wooden sleepers to concrete ones, signalling lights and third rail replacements. There was also light at the end of the tunnel because the new Downtown Line was to be ready by the end of 2015. Inflation (evidenced by the consumer price index) which hit the less affluent harder, was flat and cost of living was not a burning issue for the electorate in 2015.

The PAP also launched the Pioneer Package for the senior citizens and a more generous and comprehensive Medishield (national health security) programme. In the wake of criticisms by some civil society activists, the PAP government also made withdrawals from the Central Provident Fund (pension fund) more flexible. That the PAP's electoral support rose considerably in GE 2015 suggests that voters were pleased with the PAP's performance as the governing party between 2011 and 2015.

There are at least three noteworthy features of GE 2015. First, PM Lee fought a 'presidential campaign' and his ubiquitous image was plastered beside the election posters of all PAP candidates all across the island. Second, every constituency in the city-state was contested for the first time since its independence in 1965. Third, the opposition parties by and large avoided a three-corner fights. Nevertheless, the PAP won in straight fights in almost all constituencies.

Opposition parties, Candidates and Electorate

Parties and Candidates

Although the combined share of the opposition votes dipped by almost 10% in GE 2015, the WP suffered a 6.8 % drop in its popular votes, from 46.6% to 39.8 % in the wards it contested. As such, the WP did not do too badly when compared to the other opposition parties. Indeed, it retained all the seats it won in GE 2011. By being the best ‘losers’ (by polling the highest vote share among the opposition despite losing the constituency contest) in Fengshan SMC and the East Coast GRC, the WP is assured of another two NCMPs (Non-Constituency MPs) in Parliament to complement the six WP candidates who won their re-election in GE 2015. Unlike most of the other opposition parties, the WP has been able to attract fairly credible candidates to stand on its party ticket. That is the key to its future as a credible opposition party.

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) was the second-best opposition party performer with 31.2% of the votes in the constituencies it contested. Although SDP Secretary-General Dr Chee Soon Juan attracted huge crowds with his powerful oratory, sought to project a more moderate persona (by shedding his civil disobedience image) and sold lots of books (authored by himself) during the campaign, the SDP’s vote share in the Holland-Bukit Timah Road GRC in which Chee contested was a disappointing 33.4%—down from 40 percent in GE 2011. There are a number of plausible reasons for this electoral outcome. First, the SDP team in 2015 appeared to be less balanced and impressive compared to its 2011 GE team comprising of then fresh faces of ex-civil servant Tan Jee Say; ex-army colonel and psychiatrist Dr Ang Yong Guan; civil society activist Vincent Wijeyasingha; and likable Michelle Lee, a graduate from the London School of Economics. None of the 2011 SDP candidates in the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC stood on the same party ticket again. Other than Dr Chee and Professor Paul Tambyah, an infectious diseases specialist at the National University Hospital, the other SDP candidates did not appear to be of high calibre. Prof Tambyah was a good orator but some of his proposals appeared bizarre to many voters, such as slashing the defence budget by 40% and combining the Ministry of Health with the Defence Ministry.

Second, the SDP advocated higher taxes for the most affluent Singaporeans to reduce widening social inequality. Apparently, Dr Chee was hoping that he could appeal to the 'better angels' among the voters of Holland-Bukit Timah GRC, the most affluent constituency in Singapore. But the idiom 'turkeys do not vote for Christmas' is true for America and also Holland-Bukit Timah GRC. Third, in contrast to the tenacious PAP MPs of Holland-Bukit Timah GRC at the grassroots,¹⁰ the SDP between 2011 and 2015 had virtually no grassroots activities, especially house visits and face-to-face interaction with voters. The SDP was, insofar as Holland-Bukit Timah GRC was concerned, essentially a 'phantom' party.

Arguably, the other opposition parties and their candidates in GE 2015 were unelectable. The National Solidarity Party (NSP) which fielded the most candidates in the 2011 GE suffered from internecine leadership struggle and resignations shortly before the 2015 election campaign. It was a house badly divided, leaking and damaged. Earlier, its most charismatic candidate and star of GE 2011 Nicole Seah had quit the Party and electoral politics altogether.¹¹ The only impressive NSP candidate in the 2015 election was new Secretary General Lim Tian. However, the NSP's candidate for MacPherson SMC, Cheo Chai Chen, was probably the silliest candidate in GE 2015 when he told voters that as the PAP's Tin Pei Ling was soon to be a mother, she would spend less time with her constituents than with her baby, and that that was 'her weakness'. Cheo later claimed that it was a joke but it was sexist and not funny at all. It was hard for the NSP to shake off its negative, rudderless and 'wishy-washy' image among the electorate.

Out of electoral expediency, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Singapore People's Party (SPP) decided to jointly

10 An anecdote may be of interest to the reader. In the 2015 GE, the author's mother voted for the PAP slate of candidates at the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC. She cast a vote for the SDP slate of candidates in 2011. In puzzlement, the author asked her what prompted her to make the switch. Apparently, it had little to do with policies but with the human touch. Earlier, PAP MP Sim Ann in the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC spoke to her during a house visit. Months later, Sim Ann greeted her as 'Auntie Lam' in another house visit. And my mother was delighted that Sim Ann could still remember her name. Sim Ann got her vote.

11 A joke during the 2011 GE was that the NSP really stood for the Nicole Seah Party. By the 2015 GE, some critics made the snide remark that it stood for No Substance Party.

contest the five-member Toa Payoh-Bishan GRC. It was obvious to the voters of that GRC that the DPP-SPP slate of candidates was just a make shift group lacking in team spirit and cohesion. The names of these two political parties did not ring a bell to most Singaporeans. Simply put, they had zero brand appeal.

The People's Power Party (PPP) formed only in May 2015 and led by Goh Meng Seng contested in the Chua Chu Kang GRC and lost miserably. Most Singaporeans did not know the PPP and its candidates. Goh Meng Seng, the PPP's the only 'recognisable' candidate had hopped from party to party in the last few elections—from the WP to the NSP, and then the PPP. Although Goh may be known to some netizens for his postings and sharp critiques of the PAP government, he is otherwise unknown to most Singaporeans.

The Reform Party (RP) led by Kenneth Jeyaretnam (son of heroic and legendary opposition leader JB Jeyaretnam) did poorly at the West Coast GRC and Ang Mo Kio GRC in September 2015. While Kenneth Jeyaretnam is obviously an intelligent man who made trenchant criticisms of the PAP government's lack of transparency especially in the management of the city-state's considerable national reserves, he lacked 'people skills' and failed to attract credible candidates. Instead, he embraced candidates such as social activist Roy Ngerng and lawyer M Ravi—candidates perceived by many voters to be from the 'lunatic fringe' of Singapore politics. Kenneth Jeyaretnam and the RP also had an altercation with Han Hui Hui, another activist from the 'loony fringe', who eventually stood as an independent candidate and spoiler against the RP candidate Kumar Appavoo in Radin Mas SMC. Kenneth Jeyaretnam was a sore loser when the results were released. He said:

...this is not a mandate for the PAP's economic policies. We had a better manifesto, a better economic plan. All this is a mandate for authoritarianism and brainwashing, it shows what you do when you control everybody's housing, you control their savings, you control their jobs because you're the major employer, you control all the media, and there's no independent elections department. What I see are similar margins in North Korea and China, it's just like the Chinese

Communist Party. And I guess Singaporeans get the government they deserve, so I don't want to hear any more complaints.¹²

Jeyaretnam blamed the voters instead of conducting an honest self-criticism for the RP's poor electoral performance. Perhaps we may ask: Will the RP fold before the next GE?

The Singaporeans First Party (SFP) was launched in May 2014 and led by 2011 Presidential Candidate Tan Jee Say. This party contested Jurong GRC and Tanjong Pagar GRC but was sorely beaten. Apparently, the SFP was too new and unknown, and it lacked brand appeal to the majority of voters. Like most opposition parties in Singapore, the SFP lacks charismatic leadership, attractive candidates, resources, grassroots organisations and mass activities.

Electorate

Singaporeans are predominantly property-owning middle-class voters with a stake in the status quo. Many work for the civil service, statutory boards and government-linked corporations or have business contracts with the latter. Younger voters are especially well educated and well-travelled. These younger voters may be more pluralistic in their values and attitudes and desire more diverse voices in Parliament but are not prepared to vote for any 'Tom, Dick or Harry' just for the sake of having an opposition. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Public Opinion Survey on the 2015 GE has some revealing data.

According to the 2015 IPS cluster analysis, respondents were placed in three groups: 'Conservative' (44.3%), 'Swing' (37.8%) and 'Pluralist' (18.0%). Presumably, Conservative voters lean toward the PAP and the political status quo; Pluralists are open to more diverse voices in Parliament and opposition parties; while Swing voters are a residual category whose values are mixed and could tilt either way. Arguably, the opposition parties

12 'Reform Party Kenneth Jeyaretnam: 'What I see are similar margins in North Korea & China'', *Mothership.sg*, 12 Sep 2015 available at <<http://mothership.sg/2015/09/reform-party-kenneth-jeyaretnam-what-i-see-are-similar-margins-in-north-korea-china>> (accessed 18 Nov 2015).

in the next GE will have a challenging time trying to attract the support of Conservative and Swing voters. Conceivably, Swing voters may cast their ballots for opposition parties in future elections as protest votes if they perceive the PAP to be performing poorly as the party-in-power. The converse is true: the opposition parties will garner more support especially from the Swing voters if they appear credible and perform well at the national and local levels. Performance matters in 'meritocratic' Singapore (a state ideology drummed into the populace by the ruling party since the country's independence).

The IPS Survey showed that 89% of the respondents believe that there is a need for checks and balances in Parliament. This was up from 81% in 2006 and 84 % in 2011. However, this desire for checks and balances does not automatically translate into a vote for a mediocre opposition party. At the same time, 85% of respondents believe that it is important to have elected opposition party members in Parliament, an increase from 81% in 2011. It is obvious that even PAP voters believe that it is necessary to have an opposition in Parliament (but not necessarily in their own wards). A 'selfish' mentality is: Let voters in other wards pay the price for supporting the opposition to ensure checks and balances in Parliament necessary for good governance. An overwhelming 97% of respondents felt that it was important that the candidates be hardworking and committed. This may sound like an 'apple pie and motherhood' statement, but the reality is that it is mostly PAP MPs and activists at the grassroots *between* elections that are seen to be hardworking and committed at weekly 'Meet-the-People Sessions' (MPS) and other local events. With the exception of the WP, the opposition parties were 'ghost' parties lacking visibility, diligence and commitment at the grassroots. Having a voice in cyberspace and criticizing the PAP government is an insufficient substitute for human interaction at the grassroots to nurture relationships with voters. 54 % of respondents in the 2015 IPS Survey felt that the door-to-door visit is an influential channel of communication between parties, candidates and voters. Not to belabour the point, most opposition parties are weak in this aspect during and between elections.

On the credibility of political parties, the IPS Survey revealed:

Credible Political Parties

	2011	2015
PAP	73%	93%
WP	56%	71%
SDP	24%	46%
SingFirst	---	29%
NSP	23%	26%
RP	16%	22%

One takeaway from the IPS Survey is that while there is the prevalent desire among voters for checks and balances and more voices in Parliament, the electorate is quite discerning—the WP and SDP are deemed credible while the rest are considered very much less so. And in Singapore and other democracies, credibility hinges not only on party image but on performance at the national and ward levels, and the delivery of ‘goods and services’ to the voters.

Electoral Hotspots

During the 2015 election campaign, the betting odds allegedly given by bookies went viral in Singapore. This list of electoral outcomes purportedly showed that the ‘smart money’ concluded that the PAP would lose Aljunied GRC, Hougang SMC, East Coast GRC, Ponggol East GRC, Fengshan SMC, Sengkang West SMC and Potong Pasir SMC. With hindsight, this worked to the disadvantage of the opposition parties because it apparently alarmed the Conservative and Swing voters that the PAP would suffer more losses despite a better performance as a ruling party since 2011.

Some voters were apparently perturbed if not indignant that the opposition may gain more seats despite a weak performance in Parliament and the grassroots during the same period.¹³ For months, the ruling party

13 Some voters were puzzled by the APPETC running into so much problems with accounting systems when three out of five of the WP MPs at Aljunied GRC are lawyers. WP supporters would point out that the party’s AHPETC lacked a proper computer software system when it took over the town council from the PAP, and that virtually no commercial entities in Singapore would want to run the opposition party’s town council on its behalf. But the WP had more than four years to fix the

hammered the WP for alleged mismanagement of the financial accounts of the Aljunied, Hougang and Ponggol East Town Council (AHPETC). Rightly or wrongly, many voters felt that the WP was prevaricating over the town council issue of proper financial governance and was not satisfied with the WP's lack of transparency and response. According to one theory, the fear of a sharp loss by the PAP among the middle ground resulted in a strong backlash against the opposition parties. One popular betting list was as follows:¹⁴

Bookies' Bets for GE2015: Prediction of PAP losses

Aljunied GRC	WP: 60.9%	PAP: 39.1%
East Coast GRC	WP: 53.8%	PAP: 46.2%
Fengshan SMC	WP: 54.2%	PAP: 45.8%
Hougang SMC	WP: 65.4%	PAP: 34.6%
Punggol East SMC	WP: 66.9%	PAP: 33.1%
Sengkang West SMC	WP: 54.2%	PAP: 45.8%
Potong Pasir SMC	SPP: 54.9%	PAP: 45.1%

Obviously, these bookies' bets were off the mark. There is a conspiracy theory that some PAP supporters widely circulated the bookies' bets to frighten the electorate into *not* voting for the opposition—to avoid weakening the PAP government to the extent of impairing its ability to govern well.¹⁵ But this might be just a rumour. Voters in the next GE will

problem. The WP MP Chen Show Mao, Singapore's best GCE A level student in his cohort that year and subsequently a corporate lawyer, was supposed to be the prize catch of the WP in the 2011 GE. But his performance in parliament was insipid and lacklustre. Apparently, Chen Show Mao and Sylvia Lim lost in their wards but were saved by the votes drawn by the other three more popular colleagues (Low Thia Kiang and two ethnic minority WP MPs) in the Aljunied GRC.

14 'Bookies are betting that the opposition will win more seats in Singapore elections', *MashableAsia*, 10 September 2015. <<http://mashable.com/2015/09/10/bookies-singapore/#tk0JjReHm8qk>> (Accessed: 18 Nov 2015).

15 Apparently, some voters were concerned, if not frightened, that the humungous crowds attending the WP's rallies in 2015 were a harbinger of greater electoral success by the opposition. PAP Chairman Khaw Boon Wan's warning to the electorate not to take a PAP victory for granted made the headlines of *The Straits Times* just a few days before the polls. *The Straits Times* noted: 'With all 89 parliamentary seats being contested in Friday's General Election, the rally talk last night turned to the possibility of a freak result and a surprise new government. For National

take alleged bookies' odds with a pinch of salt and will probably not be ruled by the fear that an upsurge in opposition support will lead to a weak PAP government.

Aljunied GRC

The WP retained the Aljunied GRC by the skin of its teeth. Besides the AHPETC controversy, the WP was subjected to petty harassment from the ruling party that it failed to perform its municipal functions well (including the cleaning of the ceiling of a hawker centre in the ward) and the lack of administrative approval for the WP town council to hold its Chinese New Year trade fair at the ward. The perversity of democracy in Singapore is that it took an overwhelmingly powerful ruling party to check a relatively weak opposition party at the grassroots. Arguably, checks and balance was turned upside down in Singapore.

Despite the WP's shortcomings—real or imagined—in running AHPETC, the voters of Aljunied had a special burden not to vote the WP team (including veteran WP Secretary General Low Thia Khiang and WP Chairman Sylvia Lim) out of Parliament. If they had done so, then there would be a horrifying outcome to many Singaporeans (including some PAP supporters): Parliament would once again be monopolised by a single party. In this sense, the Aljunied voters collectively cut the WP 'some slack'.

East Coast GRC

Many analysts and punters anticipated that the East Coast GRC would be GE 2015's *battle royale* because the PAP won only 54.8 % of the votes in that constituency in 2011. Many opposition supporters sanguinely thought that this GRC was 'ripe for the picking' because the WP team which included Leon Perera (Double First in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from

Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan, anything is possible. Speaking in Sembawang GRC, he said there is no guarantee that the People's Action Party will form the next government. 'There is no safe seat where victory is assured', the PAP chairman said. 'We cannot be sure of a PAP government on Sept 12'. And even if the PAP did get re-elected, Singapore could end up with a weak government unable to get things done for the people, he added'. See 'No guarantee PAP will be in government after polls: Khaw Boon Wan', *The Straits Times*, 8 Sep 2015.

Oxford University and ex-officer of the elite Economic Development Board) and Dr Daniel Goh (a tenured Associate Professor from the sociological department, National University of Singapore) was even more impressive and attractive than its 2011 slate of candidates. Fortunately for the PAP team at the East Coast GRC, it benefited from the national-wide swing of the electorate towards the PAP. The PAP MPs of East Coast GRC had a sense of crisis since GE 2011 and worked very hard to win back the votes.¹⁶ There was also massive infrastructure upgrading in the vicinity of Bedok MRT station which brought benefits to local residents.

Ponggol East SMC

The PAP recaptured this SMC which it lost to the WP in a by-election in 2013 after PAP MP and Speaker of the House Michael Palmer resigned over an extra-marital affair. The WP MP Lee Li Lian narrowly missed retaining her seat when she obtained 48.24% of the votes, just 244 fewer votes than her tally in 2013.¹⁷ It was actually a good electoral performance for Lee Li Lian given the almost 10% swing against the opposition parties in the GE two years later. There are two plausible reasons why she lost. First, Lee Li Lian served barely two years as an MP and this did not give her enough time to consolidate her support at the grassroots. Second, the PAP candidate Charles Chong was a veteran grassroots MP reputed to be affable and effective who gets along well with voters in all the wards he had served.

Potong Pasir SMC

In GE 2011, Lina Chiam, the wife of veteran opposition leader and MP Chiam See Tong (who held Potong Pasir SMC between 1984 and 2011),

16 *Today* newspaper noted: 'During GE 2011, PAP's East Coast team garnered 54.8 per cent of the votes against the Workers' Party. Asked how he thinks it would fare this time round, Mr Lim said he does not know. The GE 2011 results were "a clear enough signal" and they have taken the results seriously, he said. He has five words to describe their philosophy: "No change but big change"—no change in the composition of their team but big changes in the way they serve residents. They have decided on going with 'deep engagement and mass personalisation', said Mr Lim'. See 'Deeper engagement with residents since GE2011: Lim Swee Say', *Today*, 27 Aug 2015.

17 Lee captured 16,045 votes in 2013 but managed to gain only 15,801 votes two years later.

lost by the slimmest of margins—114 votes. But in GE 2015, she lost badly to the same PAP candidate, Sitoh Yih Pin, by a massive 5,528 votes. There are three plausible reasons for the dismal result. First, while Lina Chiam became an NCMP by being the ‘best loser’ in the 2011 GE, she was clearly out of her depth in Parliament. Second, there was massive infrastructure upgrading in Potong Pasir including new facilities and amenities, and new elevators for many HDB flats which benefited many residents in that SMC. Third, there was an influx of new voters since 2011 with no emotional bonds to Chiam See Tong and Lina Chiam. Many new condominiums are being built especially around Potong Pasir MRT station and this will lead to further changes in the social composition and local culture of Potong Pasir. It will be an uphill task for Lina Chiam and her party to win back Potong Pasir SMC in the next GE.

Conclusion

The PAP in the next general election may have a leadership issue. If Lee Hsien Loong were to lead the PAP again in the next GE, he would be older and less energetic, and would probably be fine-tuning the status quo which he and his father (Lee Kuan Yew) had painstakingly built rather offer a slew of new initiatives or a relook the fundamentals of governance. Why change the system if it isn’t broken? If the PAP is led by a new man, he has yet to connect with the electorate.

Key to the outcome of the next GE is whether the opposition WP and the SDP can raise their game, attract credible candidates and entrench themselves at the grassroots. The WP had established their bastion at Hougang SMC and Aljunied GRC to the extent that they can weather the tough political storms. Beyond impassioned election speeches, an interesting website on policies, and popular book sales by Secretary-General Chee Soon Juan, the SDP lacks grassroots organisations and sustained activities. It is still a personality-centric, ‘phantom’ party—a voice in cyberspace but with no arms and legs at the grassroots.

Problems of foreign immigration, and issues of ageing, social welfare and taxation (which matter to both older, materialistic voters and younger, pluralistic voters) may intensify in the next GE, but the ruling PAP has

accumulated an enormous war chest (national reserves) over the decades and will be able to pay for social welfare and other public services (such as a better rail system) if necessary to keep itself in power for a long time.

Did naturalised and new citizens tip the balance for the PAP in GE 2015 and will they become even more important as a factor to keep the PAP in power perennially? Many netizens suspect that the PAP's liberal immigration policy will cumulatively create a new bloc of voters who are grateful to the PAP for a better material life in Singapore than in their home country. These critics think that this is a self-selection process: if these new citizens have a disdain for the PAP ruling party, then they would not have migrated to Singapore in the first place. But such fears bordering on xenophobia appear to be exaggerated. According to the National and Talent Division (NPDV), the number of new Singapore citizenships granted between 2007 and 2013 was around or less than 20,000 a year.

Number of Singapore citizenships granted

Year	Numbers
2007	17,334
2008	20,513
2009	19,928
2010	18,758
2011	15,777
2012	20,693
2013	20,572

Source: NPDV, 2014 Population: In Brief

Even if naturalised and new citizens—necessary to boost the country's economic growth especially when it is facing a demographic problem of rapid ageing—were to eventually form a larger segment of the electorate, it should not be so alarming to critics of Singapore's liberal immigration policy. First, a large component of the naturalised citizens are actually children who cannot vote. These children of immigrants who were born abroad or in the city-state will become Singaporeans in mentality and

values after years of socialization in Singapore schools, and after national service military conscription for the males. If we were to subtract those new citizens under the age of 21 (compulsory voting age in Singapore), the percentage of new citizens in the electorate is actually a small minority.

Second, there are no ghettos of new citizens in Singapore which form a compact and cohesive voting bloc. They are scattered and diffused across the island and their numbers do not appear large enough to tip the balance in any GRCs and SMCs. Third, new citizens are not a monolithic voting bloc. Once they join the 'rat race' in Singapore, the new citizens will face similar challenges of daily living like those voters who are citizens at birth. Many new citizens may support the PAP by becoming the 'new conservatives'. But there are also new citizens who will join the swing and pluralist groups of voters.

The 2015 IPS Survey captures the naturalised citizens as follows: 52.4% are Conservatives, 35.6% are Swing voters and 12% are Pluralists in values. According to the same survey, the distribution of political orientation among citizens at birth are: 44.1% are Conservatives, 37.5% are Swing voters and 18.3% are Pluralists. There is, therefore, a discernible difference between naturalised citizens and citizens at birth in their political orientation but the difference is actually not that great. It is unlikely that new citizens will hold the casting vote and be the kingmakers in the next GE. Simply put, new citizens are not likely to be a trump card which will keep the PAP in power in perpetuity. The PAP must perform well to attract electoral support from both naturalised citizens and citizens at birth in future elections. Simply put, the PAP will lose power if it were to alienate citizens at birth.

Minus the two trump cards of Lee Kuan Yew's state funeral and Singapore's Golden Jubilee (and all things being equal), the PAP will win the next GE but probably with a slimmer majority. The performance and the credibility of both the ruling party and the main opposition parties have always been key and will remain key in the next election. In Singapore's 'transactional' democracy, the largest segment of voters perceive that they can have a better material life with the PAP in power and not driven by a romantic and abstract desire for the 'democratic' rotation of political parties in power for its own sake. In this sense, the electoral outcome of Singapore

will not be very different from the one-party dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, even though vibrant opposition parties do exist in that Northeast Asian country.¹⁸ The voters of Singapore expressed their general will in 2015 and will do so again in the next GE. Whether they have voted wisely or not in GE 2015 is a matter of opinion but that is their constitutional prerogative to do so. And any political party which ignores the people's voice can only do so at its own peril.

Was GE 2015 the new normal or an anomaly in Singapore politics? In the aftermath of GE 2011, 'new normal' was a buzz word to describe the seemingly inexorable decline of the PAP's electoral support, the resurgence of opposition parties and the rise of social media. But in GE 2015, the PAP made a stunning comeback. Can it be that the 'new normal' in Singapore politics is a resurgence of PAP-single-party dominance? Or was GE 2015 an anomalous result due to two X-factors—Lee Kuan Yew's national mourning and Singapore's Golden Jubilee? While these two unique and never-to-be-repeated factors certainly coloured GE 2015, the critical factor in the PAP's landslide victory was its good performance, energy, adaptability and flexibility as the governing party between 2011 and 2015.

Can the opposition parties remake a 'new normal' in Singapore politics where they can capture at least a third of the seats in Parliament to block constitutional amendments by the ruling PAP? Again it boils down to the performance of the opposition parties which must be viewed as credible by the electorate. The opposition parties must also recruit candidates who can match the PAP's candidates in quality. The WP is on the right track in recruiting quality candidates who are acceptable to the electorate. However, the same cannot be said of other opposition parties.

18 The LDP has been in power at the national level in Japan since 1955 except from 1993-4 and 2009 and 2012.