

The Pragmatics of Change

Singapore's 2015 General Election

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That's a weird way of looking at the future.
The future isn't five years away.
For me, the future is what happens tomorrow.
It's the day that comes after today.
And anything can happen on that day.
One day is all it takes.
For everything to change.
Anything can happen.
And everything will change.
And not necessarily for the better.¹

On 11 September 2015, voters went to the polls for Singapore's 13th general election (GE2015). There were no walkovers this time as every constituency was contested. The People's Action Party (PAP) won convincingly with 69.9% of the popular vote, winning back the Single Member Constituency (SMC) seat of Punggol East (that was lost at a By-Election in January 2013), and even came close to toppling the Workers' Party in the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC).² It was the PAP's best performance since the GE of 2001, which saw the PAP receiving a popular vote of 75.3% against the backdrop of a world gripped by terrorism fears following 9/11. The result of GE2015 surprised everyone, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In itself, the electoral success of the PAP sweeping 83 out of 89 seats in parliament would be somewhat unremarkable since Singapore had always been dominated by a single-

1 Alfian Sa'at, 'Anything Can Happen', Act 1, *Cooling-Off Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012), 14-17.

2 Zakir Hussain, 'PAP wins big with 69.9% of vote', *The Straits Times*, 12 Sep 2015, at 1.

party—and any suggestion that the PAP would be displaced in 2015 was always going to be irrational.³

But this was not just any other election. Did Singaporeans not vote *in* and *for* change in GE2011?⁴ Did not the voters of Hougang and Punggol East affirm their overwhelming desire for change in the respective by-elections of 2012 and 2013?

The words of the Opening Act of *Cooling-Off Day* by Alfian Sa'at above captures the essence of a General Election: 'anything can happen on that day', and that 'everything will change', a change that can take place in any possible direction.⁵ At the same time however, it denotes that elections are not frozen in time, and should be seen as a broader and longer-term trajectory of changes and developments. Just as 'one swallow doth not a summer make', a famous saying attributed to Aristotle, so one election result does not necessarily mark out the next. GE2015 certainly illuminated this truism. Yet, despite the unexpected results of GE2015, it must still be seen and understood as the sequel to the gripping encounter that was GE2011.

Indeed, GE2011 heralded a number of firsts in Singapore's political landscape: it was the first time an opposition party won a GRC and it was the first time many Singaporeans witnessed a Prime Minister issuing an unequivocal public apology for his government's failings. In statistical terms, although the ruling PAP secured 81 of the 87 parliamentary seats, a landslide by any measure, it received only 60.1% of the popular votes, the lowest since the nation's independence.

GE2011 also saw the emergence of a more sophisticated and articulate electorate, many of whom were younger, first time voters who are savvy users of the Internet and social media, and who are not afraid to show their political allegiances publicly. It was not surprising then that GE2011 was variously described in the aftermath as a political, social and cultural 'game-

3 PAP Chairman and then National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan did in fact stoke fears of the PAP government losing if a freak result ensued. It is conceivable that this would have had an effect, however small or large, on the voting outcome. See: Salma Khalik and Tham Yuen-C, 'No guarantee PAP will be in govt after polls: Khaw', *The Straits Times*, 8 Sep 2015, at 1.

4 Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee (eds.) *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011).

5 Sa'at, n 1 above.

changer’, a political ‘awakening’, and perhaps the single most overused term, a ‘watershed’.⁶ Singaporeans were arguably voting in change, and perhaps a ‘new normal’ that would result in a gradual shift towards a two-party political system and/or a more responsive government that would pay closer attention to the needs of the people.

With memories of GE2011—and to an extent, the two by-elections that followed—and a broad desire by Singaporeans to conduct a stock-take of the policy responses of the PAP government, there was palpable excitement in the air in the lead-up to the 2015 polls. With their interests in domestic politics heightened by increased participation in 2011, GE2015 was destined to be eventful, if not more gripping than ever before. Will the PAP arrest its popular vote decline? Will the Workers’ Party extend their oppositional credentials? How will the Singapore Democratic Party perform under their remade chief Chee Soon Juan? Will we see the clear emergence of Singapore’s next generation leadership, with the anointment of the next Prime Minister? Which ‘suicide squad’ of candidates will the PAP send to contest and wrest back Aljunied GRC?⁷ Will a prominent minister be sent to helm Aljunied GRC?

These were just some of the questions many voters would have asked as it became clear in the course of the year that a Golden Jubilee General Election will be called in 2015. The majority of the answers—with the exception of the precise composite of Singapore’s next generation leaders, which is always a work-in-progress—would no doubt surface either implicitly or explicitly as the GE2015 campaign unfolded.

SG50 Election and The LKY-Effect

On 25 August 2015, shortly after President Tony Tan issued the Writ of Election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced on his Facebook page:

This morning, I advised the President to dissolve Parliament and issue the Writ of Election. Nomination Day will be Tuesday, 1 September, and Polling Day, 11 September. I call this general election to seek your

6 See, for example, Catherine Lim, *A Watershed Election: Singapore’s GE 2011* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011).

7 Rachel Au-Yong, ‘PAP team ‘no suicide squad’’, *The Straits Times* (29 Aug 2015), <<http://www.straitstimes.com.sg>> (accessed 30 Aug 2015).

mandate to take Singapore beyond SG50, into the next half century. You will be deciding who will govern Singapore for the next 5 years. More than that, you will be choosing the team to work with you for the next 15-20 years. You will be setting the direction for Singapore for the next 50 years.⁸

With this announcement, all speculation ceased. Political parties, especially the opposition, began in earnest to prepare for the September polls.

The invocation of SG50—the codename for Singapore’s year-long celebration of her 50th year of independence—in the PM’s announcement was deliberate as he sought to leverage off the grandest-ever National day celebration that took place a couple of weeks’ earlier on 9 August 2015. The Prime Minister had also just delivered his annual National Day Rally Speech two days prior, on 23 August 2015, where he further drew on the legacy of his father and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to generate confidence among Singaporeans that under the PAP, Singapore will continue to thrive well into the future. Towards the end of his Rally speech, PM Lee read out a letter from one of Lee Kuan Yew’s good friends:

As it was the start of 2015, we talked at length about the celebrations for SG50.

We took turns to encourage Mr Lee to attend as many SG50 events as possible. Actually, we hoped he would be there for the SG50 National Day Parade. Mr Lee listened to our exhortations, but stopped short of saying yes to our suggestions.

At each of our gatherings, it had become a tradition to ask Mr Lee ‘Will there be a Singapore many years from now?’ Once, Mr Lee said ‘Maybe’. On another, Mr Lee said ‘Yes, if there is no corruption’.

This was classic Mr Lee—ever-believing in Singapore, yet ever-cognisant that there was always work to be done, that we should never take things for granted.

Continuing with our tradition and in the spirit of SG50, that evening we asked him ‘Will there be a Singapore 50 years from now?’ Mr Lee’s answer took us all by surprise.

That evening, for the first time, Mr Lee said: ‘Of course there will be ... even better!’⁹

8 Lee Kok Min, ‘Polling Day on Sept 11, Nomination Day on Sept 1 as general election is called in Singapore’, *The Straits Times* (25 Aug 2015), available at: <http://www.straitstimes.co.sg> (accessed 25 Aug 2015).

9 Lee Hsien Loong, ‘Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally Speech 2015 (English)’, Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore. <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/>

While the mass mourning and subsequently yearning for the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew were spontaneous and heartfelt, the decision to capitalise on his memory, even subtly, for GE2015, was entirely orchestrated. It would be difficult to quantify the efficacy of the ‘LKY-effect’ on GE2015. Yet it was evident that the week-long national mourning that took place in Singapore in March 2015 had brought about a resurgence of patriotism and national pride. Indeed, the massive public outpouring of grief by many Singaporeans and foreigners in Singapore and around the world over the loss of Lee Kuan Yew, with accolades and expressions of gratitude encircling mainstream and social media, was unprecedented.¹⁰

As the melancholy of Lee’s demise began to dissipate after the state funeral, it was entirely conceivable that the PAP leaders would have begun to consider holding the General Election in 2015 to extract full dividends from the LKY-effect. This was nothing more than political expedience. Indeed, whispers of a Jubilee year General Election gathered pace from April 2015. But given that an earlier election that would blatantly ride on the LKY-effect could spark cynical reactions from the public, some of whom might still be grieving, the government prudently held it off in preference for a relatively small window of opportunity for the polls to take place in September 2015—after the National Day celebrations in August and before the 2015 Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix event kicked off a week after. It appears that a rare Friday polling date of 11 September 2015 was chosen to accommodate the final day of the Hungry Ghost Festival on Saturday, 12 September 2015, an event observed by many Taoist and Buddhist Singaporeans. There were even jokes circulating on social media that the spirit of LKY was set free during the election campaign, which coincided with the Hungry Ghost period, and had a part to play in the victory.

As the Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen revealed in an interview with *Straits Times* assistant political editor Rachel Chang in July 2015, ‘Mr

prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-national-day-rally-2015-speech-english (accessed 27 Jan2016).

10 Olivia Siong, ‘How Singapore will remember the week Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away’, *Channel NewsAsia* (21 Dec 2015), available at: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/how-singapore-will/2367328.html> (accessed 25 Jan 2016).

Lee's death was actually a final gift to his political party'.¹¹ He was really articulating the government's belief that the LKY-effect would have had a sizeable impact on the PAP's vote share, although the caution was that the effect would be a one-off. Coupled with a well-orchestrated year-long SG50 celebration across the city-state and the discretionary power of the Prime Minister to call for an election that suits the PAP's timing, GE2015 demonstrated incumbency advantage *par excellence*. It also reveals sagacious politics on the part of the PAP and pays testament to Singapore's much-vaunted ideology of pragmatism.¹²

The Pragmatics of GE2015

One of the most pervasive ideologies of PAP-run Singapore is pragmatism. In common parlance, the term refers to the mindset of 'being practical' and the desire for 'practical results'.¹³ In the context of Singapore, pragmatism has become entwined with the derivation of economic returns and the maintenance of political dominance by the PAP.¹⁴ Singapore's success as a global economic powerhouse is attributed precisely to its pragmatic leadership and administration. It is no coincidence therefore that the late Lee Kuan Yew was described as a 'pragmatist' by just about every international media outlets when they sought to write their versions of his obituary. *The Guardian* (UK) described Lee as having left a 'legacy of authoritarian pragmatism';¹⁵ an opinion column in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *The Drum* website described Lee as

11 Rachel Chang, 'The Lee Kuan Yew factor in winning over voters', *The Straits Times* (26 Jul 2015), available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com.sg> (accessed 27 Jul 2015).

12 See Michael Hiil and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995); and, Kenneth Paul Tan, 'The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore' (2012) 42(1) *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 67–92.

13 Terence Lee, *The Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 2010), at 3–5.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Carlton Tan, 'Lee Kuan Yew leaves a legacy of authoritarian pragmatism', *The Guardian* (23 Mar 2015), available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/23/lee-kuan-yews-legacy-of-authoritarian-pragmatism-will-serve-singapore-well> (accessed 10 Dec 2015).

‘Singapore’s greatest pragmatist’;¹⁶ and, *The Economist* conflates Singapore’s success with Lee’s legacy of ‘an honest and pragmatic government.’¹⁷ In other words, Singapore under LKY and the PAP has become synonymous with the ideology of pragmatism.

Pluralising the term ‘pragmatic’ into ‘pragmatics’, however, takes the discourse into a slightly different plane. In the field of linguistics and interpersonal communication, pragmatics refers to the social language skills we use in our daily interactions and conversations with others. They include what we say, how we say it, our body language and the extent of its appropriateness in relation to any given situation.¹⁸ Pragmatics is more commonly applied as ‘conversation analysis’ where in order to conclude if a message between two parties is accurately transmitted and received, otherwise known as ‘pragmatic competence’, the meanings in each communicative act must be properly understood by both parties.¹⁹ In other words, it seeks to uncover if two parties can communicate competently—and therefore, practically.

To appreciate the ‘change in voting’ that we witnessed in GE2015, we would do well to recall the swift actions taken by the PAP following the electorate’s expressed desire for change, à la ‘voting in change.’²⁰ I argue that the application of the principles of ‘pragmatics’, both in communication *and* in ideological terms contributed significantly to the reversal of the PAP’s electoral fortunes. Singaporeans voted pragmatically at GE2011, desiring their voices to be heard and seeking changes to a number of policy areas, and aside from a few missteps—the most prominent being the 2013 Population White Paper—the PAP responded largely with communicative and pragmatic competence. In the spirit of the current era of ongoing

16 Elliot Brennan, ‘Lee Kuan Yew: Singapore’s Great Pragmatist’, *The Drum* (23 Mar 2015), available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-23/brennan-lee-kuan-yew:-singapore-s-great-pragmatist/6340834> (accessed 1 Feb 2016).

17 The Data Team, ‘Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore: An Astonishing Record’, *The Economist* (22 Mar 2015), available at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/03/lee-kuan-yews-singapore> (accessed 1 Feb 2016).

18 Robyn Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

19 Shaozhong Liu, ‘What is Pragmatics?’, available at: <http://www.gxnu.edu.cn/Personal/szliu/definition.html> (Accessed: 2 Feb 2016).

20 Tan and Lee, n 4 above.

electioneering and campaigning, the PAP's party convention of November 2011 became a 'post-mortem' self-examination of what went wrong with GE2011. PAP chairman and then Housing Minister Khaw Boon Wan delivered a speech at the convention entitled 'We hear you, we'll change, and improve your lives' which identified the need to 'communicate and connect' with the people via all media (and non-media) platforms.²¹ Communications Minister Yaacob Ibrahim responded with a speech of his own that concluded that Singapore's 'government communication style must evolve'.²²

The PAP thus identified the failure in communication or 'pragmatic incompetence' as the weakest link in its style of governance, and sought thereafter to develop strategies to deal with it. The most tangible outcome was the appointment of Janadas Devan as Chief of Government Communications from 1 July 2012. According to the Ministry of Communication and Information, Janadas' job was to 'coordinate the Government's public communication efforts and lead the information Service in enhancing its public communication network across the public sector'.²³ Even though it is not clear how Janadas would fulfill this vast mission, many Singaporeans soon saw themselves participating in a year-long nationwide 'listening' exercise.

Headed by then newly-minted Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, this was the *Our Singapore Conversation* (OSC) project, designed to 'reach out to as many Singaporeans as possible, from all walks of life [and] to understand each other's perspectives and aspirations'.²⁴ The OSC's report *Reflections* declared that 47,000 Singaporeans had participated in more than 660 small group dialogue sessions. Along with 1,331 email threads and more than 4,000 Facebook posts and messages, the government was able to

21 Khaw Boon Wan, 'PAP: We hear you, we will change', *The Straits Times* (29 Nov 2011), available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com.sg> (accessed 30 Dec 2011).

22 Ibid.

23 Ministry of Communications and Information, 'Appointment to the Government Information Service', Press Release (27 Jun 2012), available at: http://www.mci.gov.sg/content/mci_corp/web/mci/pressroom/categories/press_releases/2012/appointment_to_thegovernmentinformationservice.html (accessed 10 Dec 2013).

24 Reflections of Our Singapore Committee (Singapore: Government of Singapore, Aug 2013).

tap on to the concerns and core aspirations of Singaporeans.²⁵ The promise was that the collective findings of the exercise would be digested and would inform policy reviews through the relevant government agencies. Despite sounding very much like a massive public relations exercise, OSC enabled the government to identify key concerns among Singaporeans and to implement practical solutions to solve them quickly.

In an interview with *The Australian* daily, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself attributed the improved showing of the PAP government at GE2015 to three things: the LKY factor, SG50 and the government's hard work in addressing problems on the ground. As *The Straits Times* reported,

Fortunately, in this last election, some of the opposition pitches were so shrill that the population wisely took counsel and decided there was a real risk.'

Mr Lee said that the 70 per cent vote share of his People's Action Party (PAP) in the Sept 11 polls surprised him.

It could be attributed to three things, he added. They are: a sense of gratitude following the death of his father, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, in March; the feel-good factor of the Golden Jubilee; and the Government and PAP Members of Parliament working hard to solve both immediate and long-term issues.

Although we have not solved all the problems, people could see we were working at it, and things were getting better,' he said. 'They gave us credit for trying.'

Asked whether the electoral success would be hard to sustain, he said: 'Every election is different. I do not work on the basis that this is the baseline for the next election.'

While the results of GE2015 may be interpreted as Singapore taking a flight (back) to the safety of the only party they have ever known to have ruled Singapore,²⁶ or revealing a long-held paradox of authoritarian politics,²⁷ it is also equally important to acknowledge the adaptability of

25 Ibid.

26 Michael D Barr, 'Singapore's Flight to Safety', *Inside Story* (14 Sep 2015), available at: <http://insidestory.org.au/singapores-flight-to-safety> (accessed 15 Sep 2015).

27 Lily Rahim, 'Fear, smear and the paradox of authoritarian politics in Singapore', *The Conversation* (28 Sep 2015), available at: <https://theconversation.com/fear-smear-and-the-paradox-of-authoritarian-politics-in-singapore-47763> (accessed 30 Sep 2015).

the PAP,²⁸ and indeed, the entrenchment of pragmatism as the dominant ideology in the socio-political landscape of Singapore.

Herein lies the 'new normal' in Singapore: the U-turn or the directional change in voting that we have witnessed in GE2015 was indeed the sequel to GE2011. Just as GE2006 was the prequel to GE2011, with signs of slow traffic and breakdowns, the road to GE2020 will be paved with bumps, detours and free-flowing passages. In the intervening period, which has already begun, all political parties would do well to acknowledge that voters are intelligent political beings. In the case of Singapore, this intelligence is embodied in its passionate embrace of pragmatism cum pragmatics.

Organisation of This Book

This book is divided into three sections: (1) Introduction and Updates; (2) Core GE2015 issues and (3) Campaign Analyses. Following this opening chapter, Jason Lim tracks in a methodical and chronological manner the key political developments in Singapore from GE2011 up to the eve of GE2015. In Chapter 2, Lim identifies a number of hot-button issues/events that required some degree of state responses in the forms of policy shifts, legal and/or political interventions. Some of these include: policy responses to xenophobic sentiments and the integration of foreigners, heritage concerns and attempts by so-called 'revisionist historians' to challenge official versions of historical events, Roy Ngerng's criticism of the CPF scheme, Amos Yee's juvenile YouTube video rants against Lee Kuan Yew following his death, and municipal concerns in relation to the Workers' Party's alleged mismanagement of the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC). All of these have combined to form the backdrop of issues that many Singaporeans would have carried with them to GE2015. Some of these issues are examined in greater depth in Sections 2 and 3 of this book, yet the extent to which each of them ultimately mattered remains moot.

In Chapter 3, Kevin Tan provides an up-to-date discussion on the status of Singaporeans' right to vote as well as the prospects of legal and constitutional changes following GE2015. Tan revisits the case of Mdm

28 Eugene K. B. Tan, 'Why the PAP won big this GE', *Today* (12 Sep 2015); available at: <http://www.todayonline.com/ge2015/why-pap-won-big> (accessed 12 Sep 2015).

Vellama d/o Marie Muthu who filed an application to the courts to declare that the Prime Minister did not have an unfettered discretion in deciding whether and when to announce a by-election in the Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) following the expulsion of the Workers' Party Yaw Shin Leong. The case was mostly forgotten as it was heard only after the by-election, which saw the election of WP's Png Eng Huat, yet the final outcome was a victory for Vellama, an ordinary citizen who simply wanted an MP at all times to represent her and other residents. Tan heralds this outcome in his chapter as: 'the most important constitutional law decision the Singapore courts have handed down with respect to the structure of the legislature and the place of elections and citizens' electoral rights within it.'²⁹ Tan then goes on to contemplate the prospects of changes to the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) scheme, the GRC system and the Office of the Elected Presidency as articulated and proposed by President Tony Tan and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in Parliament in January 2016. From a legal and constitutional perspective, the next five years will be fascinating to watch.

Chapter 4 by Loke Hoe Yeong walks us through the parties, personalities and protagonists that defined GE2015. With 'party-personalities' a common feature in the media age, Singapore's GE2015 was no exception. Loke provides a write-up on the candidates who stood for election for the first time. While there were no stand-out candidates from a media publicity point of view, there were nonetheless some who garnered more attention than others. These include, among others, the remade Chee Soon Juan (SDP), Paul Tambyah (SDP), Daniel Goh (WP), He Ting Ru (WP), and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam (PAP).

In Section Two, the authors analyse a number of core GE issues. These are issues that are either perennial, in that they are constantly in the political frame, or have caused some degree of angst at the previous general election (GE2011). Loh Kah Seng starts off this section in Chapter 5 with an analysis of the housing issue which did not feature much in GE2015. This was surprising given that the escalating costs of both public and private

29 Kevin Tan, 'Voting and Governance: A Legal and Constitutional Update' (2016, Chapter 3, in this volume).

housing, along with a lengthy waitlist for new HDB flats, caused significant angst among Singaporeans at GE2011. While on the one hand, the PAP can be said to have responded favourably to citizens' concerns via a range of measures such as building HDB flats ahead of demand, privileging citizens ahead of permanent residents in the purchase of flats and in mortgage restrictions. On the other hand, Loh argues that the real problem in housing policy is the government's overarching power and role as the central planner, and this was one key area that the opposition failed to apply sufficient scrutiny. As such, Loh expects the housing issue to resurface at future elections.

In Chapter 5, Leong Yew tackles the 'foreigner' issue that was widely expected to be contentious in GE2015 in view of the many unpleasant events related to foreigner and immigration policies post-GE2011. The mere mention of the Population White Paper and the Little India Riot, both which took place at either ends of 2013, would invoke memories and concerns among many Singaporeans. Although it featured in GE2015 party manifestoes—including those of the PAP's and WP's—Yew points out that it has become diluted. One of the reasons is that it is often a 'proxy' for a range of other areas of concern—such as overcrowding, job security, rising cost of living, and public housing availability—most of which are related to the economy. As a result, the government would frame the issue in policy terms: as the need to carefully calibrate the inflow of new migrants without impacting on the economy. For better or worse, such positions were seen as responsible policy-making and largely supported by the opposition despite their constant refrain that citizens should be privileged in social and economic transactions ahead of non-citizens. Towards the end of the chapter, Yew also considers the dilution of terms like 'Singaporean' and 'foreign', especially in context of the composition of the 'Singaporean core', and how they have and will become contested and open to different strategies of electoral framing in the future.

The conjoint issues of transport and infrastructure are examined by Loke Hoe Yeong and Alex Lew in Chapter 7. Most Singaporeans would have been desensitised to news of MRT breakdowns by the time GE2015 came about, and expectations were rife that the government would have

been taken to task on this issue alone. However, the surprise announcement on the eve of the election that Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew was to retire from politics released the pressure valve and gave the PAP wiggle room to speak glowingly about measures that the departing minister had put in place—such as a better servicing regimes for MRT trains, and the ongoing construction and completion of new MRT lines—that would improve public transport and infrastructure. There were also murmurs on how the jinxed transport portfolio had claimed the scalps of two ministers—Raymond Lim and Lui Tuck Yew—in 2011 and 2015 respectively. Many Singaporeans subsequently began speculating on the person who would inherit the poisoned chalice of the Transport Ministry.³⁰

In Chapter 8, Walid Jumblatt Abdullah undertakes a contemplative analysis of the political and ideological positioning of education in GE2015. The chapter assesses the education policies of the PAP, WP and SDP and finds that while there had been increasing calls for the mitigation of elitism in schools to varying degrees, the PAP's brand of meritocracy still remains the basis of all education matters. At the end of the day, education was a political non-issue at GE2015, not because it was not important, but that the two opposition parties that would have mounted alternative platforms did not pursue it. Abdullah notes two reasons for this: first, the SDP chose to focus on healthcare instead of education; and secondly, the WP's position on education did not vary greatly from the PAP's.

Chapter 9 by Terri-Anne Teo explores the problematic issue of race, religion and gender in terms of how they are represented in political and public discourses. Teo notes how Muslim issues—including the hotly-debated *tudung* ban and the appeal for Muslims to withdraw CPF funds to allow them to perform the *haj*—were given low visibility, or were completely absent, during and in the lead-up to GE2015. Where mentioned, such issues were typically conflated with broader multiracial discourses. The chapter also looks rather candidly at the contrasting treatments of two electoral candidates—DPM and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, and

30 The transport portfolio subsequently fell to Khaw Boon Wan, who has been labelled 'Mr Fix-It' as he was roped in as the National Development minister in 2011 to 'fix up' housing issues, and prior to that, he was Health Minister (2004-2011).

independent candidate Samir Salim Neji. While the former was lauded as an exemplary politician and given heroic status, nicknamed ‘Thamania’ in social media, the latter became vilified because of his racial composite and place-of-birth. In the final analysis, Teo argues that the failure of parties and candidates to question such absences of race, religion and gender and grant greater visibility to new diversities and identities enables the status quo, one currently shaped by xenophobia, racism and assertions of racial and religious harmony, to remain intact. More affirmative action is certainly required at future elections.

Section Three shifts from the examination of core election issues to critical analyses of the campaign proper. Netina Tan sets the scene in Chapter 10 with an exposition of electoral integrity in Singapore. The chapter assesses the effects of various modes of pre-election malpractice in Singapore—ranging from constant tweaking of electoral rules to the practice of gerrymandering (the frequent and arbitrary adjustment of electoral boundaries)—on GE2015. Although electoral integrity and fairness did not impact on the swing towards the PAP on this occasion, Tan contends that unfair elections can undermine democratic principles of transparency and accountability, and weaken the political legitimacy and mandate of the winning party over time.

Bridget Welsh’s compelling study on voting behavior in GE2015—based on two sets of data, in-depth interviews and a nationally representative post-election polling—is the subject of Chapter 11. This chapter examines different groups of voters in GE2015 and explains the factors that shaped their voting behavior, with specific attention placed on communities that changed their vote from the GE2011 and the underlying reasons for doing so. Among the ‘social cleavages’ and markers of differences that Welsh analyses are: generational, gender, ethnicity, citizenship and class differences, with the spotlight placed on older and younger voters, women, ethnic/national minorities, new citizens, and voters from varied socio-economic classes. As was the case in GE2011, this study shows that differences in social identities affect the way Singaporeans engage politically, and this in turn has a bearing on votes and electoral outcomes. While Welsh’s chapter throws much light on the complexity of voting behaviour in GE2015, the fact that there was a

10% swing in votes towards the PAP shows that voting patterns do and have the potential to change in future elections. Electoral politics in Singapore looks set to get more uncertain, but no less exciting.

Just as he had done in 2011, sociologist Terence Chong took to the rallies again in 2015. Chapter 12 documents an important feature of election campaigning in Singapore: attendance at political rallies to listen to prospective candidates and to soak in the campaign atmosphere. In 2015, a total of 64 rallies were staged between 2 and 9 September 2015. Chong makes three pertinent observations about election rallies at GE2015: (1) rallies are attractive to voters as they are seen as unmediated and unfiltered, and therefore authentic, means of communication; (2) the demographic profile and size of rally crowds are not indicative of voting patterns; and (3) the rallies in GE2015 served as spaces of rehabilitation, particularly in relation to the re-emergence of a milder-mannered and more moderate Chee Soon Juan. In spite of the increasing take-up of social media and other forms of technological mediation, it is envisaged that the election rally will continue to occupy a place in the political landscape of Singapore.

If the election rally is the authentic communication space, where does that leave the Internet and online forms of media and communication? Weiyu Zhang and Natalie Pang tackles this very question—and more—in their chapter on ‘The Internet and Social Media.’ Chapter 13 examines this issue via three themes: (1) Without a space to hold public speeches and rallies, the Internet provides a level-playing field for citizens to express their opinions and engage in socio-political debates; (2) The growth of the online middle ground, particularly with sites like *Mothership* and *The Middle Ground*, has enabled Internet sites and blogs to become mainstream; and (3) The Anti-Spiral-of-Expression theory can be used to explain how online exchanges in themselves do not necessarily indicate or influence voting patterns. Regardless of one’s perception of the impact of the online space on electoral outcomes, it has become part and parcel of political communication and electoral campaigning, and is constantly changing and evolving. It is therefore a space that continues to warrant close observation and understanding by political parties/candidates and voters alike.

The section and book closes with Lam Peng Er seeking to make sense of the results of GE2015. In Chapter 14, Lam dissects the key battlegrounds of GE2015: Aljunied GRC (Group Representation Constituency); East Coast GRC; Punggol East SMC (Single Member Constituency); and Potong Pasir SMC. The thoughts of many Singaporeans as they mulled over the surprising results of GE2015 are also articulated here: Did GE2011 spark a ‘new normal’ or was it an anomaly? Lam does not quite answer this question directly in his chapter but ponders the possibility that this ‘new normal’ could in fact be a resurgence of the PAP-single-party-dominance. Equally, GE2015 could have delivered an anomalous result due to the two unique and never-to-be-repeated factors of the LKY-effect and the SG50 celebrations. At the same time, it is likely that the electorate chose to reward the PAP in GE2015 for its response, and policy responsiveness, following its poor performance in GE2011. As Lam notes early on in his chapter about the transactional nature of electoral politics in Singapore:

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. [...] 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.³¹

Conclusion

This book has been entitled *Change in Voting* because it denotes a marked shift from the outcomes of GE2011 where Singaporeans were *Voting in Change*.³² In putting together this volume, the editors have sought to identify themes and topics that would pique the interest of readers who have inquiring dispositions towards politics in Singapore.

31 Lam Peng Er, ‘New Normal Or Anomaly? 2015 General Election and PAP’s Electoral Landslide’ (2016, Chapter 14, in this volume).

32 The editors of this book had also edited an earlier volume covering GE2011, entitled: *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore’s 2011 General Election* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011).

We have specifically invited chapter authors to fill in the gaps that showed up during the writing and publication of the previous volume. These have included discussions of the housing sector, immigration and the foreigner issue, transport and infrastructure, education, ethnicity, religion and gender issues. Although some of these issues did not come to the fore in GE2015, they remain very central to the social, cultural and political lives of Singaporeans—and would therefore (re)surface in the future.

For some, as the playwright Alfian Sa'at enunciates, the future is tomorrow. For every other voter, the future is but five years away.

I'm worried about my generation.
 I'm worried about people who think
 Politics is like fashion.
 What's cool and what's not.
 Change for the sake of change.
 Opposition for the sake of Opposition.
 I told my friends that
 We should be careful about gambling
 With our future
 But one of them said, 'If whoever we voted
 Doesn't do a good job, we'll get rid of them
 After five years.'³³

33 Sa'at, n 1 above.