

1 Singapore's dominant party system

On the night of 11 September 2015, pundits, journalists, political bloggers, academics, and others in Singapore's chattering classes watched in long-drawn amazement as the media reported excitedly on the results of independent Singapore's twelfth parliamentary elections that trickled in until the very early hours of the morning. It became increasingly clear as the night wore on, and any optimism for change wore off, that the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) had swept the votes in something of a landslide victory that would have puzzled even the PAP itself (Zakir, 2015).

In the 2015 general elections (GE2015), the incumbent party won 69.9 per cent of the total votes (see Table 1.1). The Workers' Party (WP), the leading opposition party that had five elected members in the previous parliament, lost their Punggol East seat in 2015 with 48.2 per cent of the votes cast in that single-member constituency (SMC). With 51 per cent of the votes, the WP was able to hold on to Aljunied, a five-member group representation constituency (GRC), by a very slim margin of less than 2 per cent. It was also able to hold on to Hougang SMC with a more convincing win of 57.7 per cent. However, it was undoubtedly a hard defeat for the opposition.

The strong performance by the PAP bucked the trend observed since GE2001, when it had won 75.3 per cent of the total votes, the highest percentage since independence. In GE2006, this dropped to 66.6 per cent. In GE2011, it dropped even further to 60.1 per cent, the PAP's worst performance since Singapore gained independence. The PAP lost Aljunied GRC to the opposition and, as a result, two high-profile senior politicians, Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Hwee Hua, lost their seats. This downward trend was even more significant when considered in the context of a rising trend in the percentage of overall seats that were contested: in GE2001, opposition parties fielded candidates in only 35 per cent of the seats; in GE2006, it was 56 per cent; and in GE2011, this percentage rose to 94 per cent. Thus, in GE2015, when 100 per cent of the seats were contested, there was every expectation that the PAP would only manage to win the election with a much smaller margin.

Two by-elections followed GE2011. The first, in 2012, was called when Yaw Shing Leong, WP Member of Parliament (MP) for Hougang, was expelled from

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Table 1.1 General elections since 1984

Year	No. of seats contested/total no. of seats	Percentage of seats contested	No. of parties contesting	No. of seats won by PAP/percentage of seats	No. of seats won by other parties/ percentage of seats	PAP's percentage of the popular vote
1984	49/79	62	9	77/97	2/3	64.8
1988	70/81	86	8	80/99	1/1	63.2
1991	40/81	49	6	77/95	4/5	61.0
1997	36/83	43	6	81/98	2/2	65.0
2001	29/84	35	5	82/98	2/2	75.3
2006	47/84	56	4	82/98	2/2	66.6
2011	82/87	94	7	81/93	6/7	60.1
2015	89/89	100	9	83/93	6/7	69.9

Sources: *Singapore Elections*, available: www.singapore-elections.com/ (accessed 2 May 2016); Chew Hui Min (2015) 'GE2015: A look back at the last 5 general elections from 1991 to 2011', *The Straits Times*, 28 August.

the party, following rumours that he had had an extramarital affair with a party member. In the by-election on 26 May 2012, WP candidate Png Eng Huat beat the PAP candidate Desmond Choo with a percentage of 62.1. Yaw had won the SMC in GE2011 with 64.8 per cent of the votes. In 2013, PAP MP for Punggol East and Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer also resigned as the result of an extramarital affair. WP candidate Lee Li Lian, who had lost Punggol East with 41.1 per cent of the votes in GE2011, won it in the by-election on 26 January 2013 with 54.5 per cent, beating the PAP candidate Koh Poh Koon by more than 10 per cent of the votes.

These results signalled a rise in the fortunes of the opposition. The WP was able to recruit highly credentialed candidates, engage deeply with the constituency grassroots, and impose a tightly disciplined management style that paid attention to public communications and party branding. More than any other opposition party, the WP was able to 'bridge the credibility gap' (Ong and Tim, 2014). GE2011 seemed to mark the start of a 'new normal', a time when the ruling party could expect tougher criticism and more compelling challenges from opposition parties, civil society groups, and private citizens. Singapore's usually placid civil society was starting to be populated by more articulate and politically sophisticated advocacy groups, alongside the usually timid private interest and civic outreach groups. Public intellectuals were emerging to provide ideological leadership, often of a counterhegemonic nature. More widespread popular participation in social media had amplified their consciousness-raising powers.

All these signs seemed to suggest that Singapore had been moving slowly but surely along the trajectory of liberal democratization. Thus, the PAP landslide victory and the opposition's crushing defeat in 2015 were a puzzle to many. The media and several political watchers were understandably quick to describe this as a national swing back to the PAP, pointing to an immanent collapse of the opposition. Should GE2015 be seen as evidence that weakens the liberal democratization thesis by confirming Singapore's exceptional nature? Does Singapore's political development take on a cyclical rather than linear form? Or should GE2015 be regarded as a glitch in time, which will soon yield to the inevitable logic and force of political liberalization? In an attempt to solve this puzzle – and to plot plausible democratic trajectories into Singapore's future – a good start would be to analyse the possible reasons behind votes for and against the PAP and votes for and against the opposition.

Explaining the anti-PAP vote

Those who voted against the PAP in GE2015, or wanted to do so, would have had the following reasons for doing it.

Elitist public image, ineffective public communications

The PAP's public image has become increasingly elitist. In the social media age, their elite behaviour and inability to communicate with ordinary Singaporeans

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without making terrible faux pas have become widely observed and criticized (Loh, 2013; M.S. Goh, 2015).

The party began with social democratic roots that took the egalitarian aspects of meritocracy as seriously as the more capitalistic values of competitiveness, incentive, and reward that eventually came to dominate its worldview. In the 1990s, Singapore became more deeply embedded in globalization and embraced more fully the private-sector values of 'new public management' (NPM). During this time, meritocracy was transforming into a vulgar form of elitism, where a highly-paid and exulted leadership, no longer representative of the range of socio-economic backgrounds in Singapore, made policies that were technically proficient, yet unresponsive to the expressed concerns of the common people (Balji, 2013). NPM meant giving the people a high-quality customer experience when they received government services, but not necessarily taking their input as citizens seriously. Widening inequalities of income and wealth exacerbated the perception that the PAP, a party for the elite, the rich, and foreigners, was interested only in perpetuating itself and its rewards. In reaction, a mass politics of disengagement, mistrust, and envy was fast emerging (Wembridge, 2015).

The PAP government's record of successfully developing Singapore from 'Third World to First' in a short span of half a century has engendered paternalistic arrogance, an inflated sense of superiority and self-importance, and a dismissive attitude towards quotidian experiences that matter to people (Khoo, 2015). With lifestyles, values, and worldviews that seemed generally to be those of the elite, PAP leaders often showed themselves to be out of touch with the ground, dismissing popular emotions and ordinary experience as irrelevant or simply wrong (ashwini, 2015; Chin, 2015). To ordinary Singaporeans, several PAP candidates lacked empathy and emotional intelligence (Chang, 2013).

Singaporeans reacted critically to what they considered to be callous and insensitive comments made in public by the PAP elite, including a reference to 'natural aristocracy' made at a high-profile conference (Xu, 2015); an observation posted online that senior citizens who were out on the streets collecting cardboard to earn some money were actually doing this for exercise (Palatino, 2015); and, in response to a parliamentary question about Singaporeans on public assistance, the retort: 'How much do you want? Do you want three meals in a hawker centre, food court or restaurant?' (Loh, 2010). Through social media, netizens showed their displeasure, compiled lists of follies, and circulated them online ('Infamous quotes', 2015). Even though several opposition candidates had also been caught making gaffes in public (Wee, 2015), they were not readily viewed in the light of elitism. While it is unlikely that any of the PAP politicians intended to be insulting or derogatory, their words and actions were read as a reflection of the true feelings of the elite.

Those who attempted to connect with ordinary Singaporeans by sounding folksy, presumably to dispel the image of being out of touch, ended up sounding condescending, insincere, and inauthentic (Chang, 2013). When a junior minister tried to discredit a charismatic veteran opposition politician by mocking

his actions through sarcasm and a grating use of colloquial expressions, her efforts fell flat and made her the subject of popular derision (Yap, 2015). One very senior minister peppered his speeches with folksy analogies that were sometimes ironic: when he compared the opposition to the rooster that took credit for the sun's rising, he may not have realized how the audience might have compared that to the PAP's taking wholesale credit for Singapore's success (P. Lee, 2015). PAP politicians were also mocked and criticized for other reasons. A rookie candidate thumped his chest like a jubilant gladiator as his team addressed the public on nomination day. A veteran politician made an off-colour joke about how fortunate he was that his father had left China for Singapore and that Singapore had separated from Malaysia, or else, he said with exaggerated relief, he might still be a Chinese or Malaysian citizen ('Lim Swee Say criticized', 2015). An MP posted on his Facebook page so many selfies that they bordered on self-promotional narcissism (Cheong, 2015).

These individually unsuccessful attempts to connect with the ground may also be a symptom of a broadly superficial and inauthentic approach to public engagement. To a technocratic government that views the world through a dehumanizing lens of hard data and technical analysis, unable to acknowledge the value of emotions and other intangibles in the hard business of policymaking and leadership, public engagement was understood to be public education and – especially in the social media age – image management and public relations. Facts and figures were used to dismiss popular concerns and emotions. Only the PAP establishment were privileged to determine what the facts were and how they should be interpreted. Furthermore, the government has not been very open to the public when it comes to information, data, and statistics (Biswas and Hartley, 2015).

Some PAP politicians, especially during election campaigns and public debates, often treated their adversaries with little respect, engaging them in a humiliating and bullying style. As illustrated in Chapter 4, they made *ad hominem* arguments to ridicule their opponents instead of debating issues and principles. They showed an inability to listen and converse, always wanting to win an argument, cut people off, and have the last word. They were unable to admit their mistakes or that their opponent may have a good point. Their logic was 'either/or' and 'all-or-nothing', which made it difficult for them to compromise or collaborate.

Several PAP politicians have come down hard on their opponents, especially during election campaigns, with the media compliantly reinforcing and augmenting the censure. For instance, one minister after another attacked the WP for mismanagement of the town council under its care, thus preventing the short nine-day campaign period from being used as a platform for discussing the WP manifesto. The PAP establishment continues to use lawsuits to deal with its critics, an approach that suffuses the public sphere with a cloud of anxiety that, alongside a culture of political apathy, constrains citizen participation in its fullest sense. All of this could be off-putting to voters, some of whom might have viewed it as bullying and lacking a sense of fair play. Their sympathies lay with the underdog.

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From pragmatism to ideological fixation

Some voters associated PAP government policies with an obsessive economic growth agenda that did not pay enough attention to other primary goals for the nation such as equity, cultural flourishing, or human well-being. As argued in Chapter 3, what the government often celebrated as its brand of pragmatism turned out to be indistinguishable from a kind of market fundamentalism, where the unquestioned and unquestionable goal was economic growth, while the means for achieving it rarely strayed beyond the neoliberal capitalist range of policy options. Some voters have become concerned about the way that such policies have threatened Singapore's cultural, architectural, and natural heritage, sense of place, and national identity. This concern was especially lifted by the wave of nostalgia generated by the nation's 50th anniversary celebrations, which are discussed in Chapter 8. To these voters, the basis of the PAP's authority had become excessively transactional and lacked the heroism, vision, broadmindedness, and inspiration of transformational leadership (Johannis, 2015).

Some voters also noted how neoliberal market fundamentalism and an obsession with growth ignored the fact that there had not been the kind of trickle-down effect that the government had promised would benefit more Singaporeans. The sense of a widening income gap and a wealth gap was palpable at the day-to-day level, as densely populated Singapore with its banking and wealth management system made itself more attractive to the global super-rich. In the meantime, the government's resistance to a more comprehensive social welfare system (beyond workfare schemes and constant urging to upgrade and up-skill) and policies like minimum wage, made it unpopular among voters who have seen or were themselves experiencing the problems of poverty (including the aged poor) and high cost of living and doing business ('The stingy nanny', 2010). The neoliberal capitalist economy also demanded a liberal immigration policy, as discussed in Chapter 6, perceived by many voters as the PAP government's folly, which placed foreigners first and Singaporeans second.

The next two chapters show how decades of successful government, mostly admired by a citizenry grateful for its broad tangible benefits, have also reinforced a sense of self-importance among the elite, transforming a pragmatically adaptive outlook into a dogmatic, risk-averse adherence to outmoded success formulas, even as circumstances change.

Policy failures

While the PAP suffered from negative public perception that its candidates were arrogant and insensitive to the changing needs of ordinary Singaporeans, they were also being criticized for their competence. In recent years, the electorate has held the government accountable for letting a suspected terrorist escape from detention and for a series of disruptive flash floods, among other things. They also blamed the government for policy failures leading to Singapore becoming one of the most expensive and overcrowded cities in the world.

Public housing has become less affordable and public transportation has failed to live up to the demands of the population. Deep inequalities of income and wealth are not just abstract concepts, but closely felt realities in the everyday lives of this small and dense city. For these failings, the prime minister (PM) publicly apologized to the people, which was unprecedented.

Many voters regarded the PAP government's liberal immigration policy as being at the heart of Singapore's many problems today (Jalelah, 2015). They still recalled with frustration and resentment the 6.9 million population planning parameter that had been announced without public debate in a white paper released in January 2013. The feeling was exacerbated as they found themselves in an overcrowded city with an infrastructure that was straining to cope with the demands of increasing daily usage. They viewed a 2013 riot in Little India as a consequence of indiscriminate immigration policies without attending to the need for integration and accommodation. Some voters also regarded the liberal inflow of lower-wage workers as creating the conditions for employers to exploit lower-wage Singaporeans. The liberal immigration policy was viewed as responsible for foreigners taking professional, manager, executive, and technician (PMET) jobs away from Singaporeans. The inflow of foreigners, including the super-rich, was viewed as responsible for the rising cost of living. Voters were concerned about public housing and healthcare not being affordable, available, and accessible. And they worried about whether they could afford to retire.

Old formulas and the social media

The PAP could bank on an illustrious history and track record, including Singapore's first PM Lee Kuan Yew (LKY)'s leadership and global prestige. While this could mean that risk-averse Singaporeans who have never lived under any other regime besides the PAP government's would be reluctant to break away from the path of demonstrated success, it could also encourage the PAP to become overly reliant on old formulas of success and, in that way, make the PAP appear backward-looking. Indeed, the PAP did not say anything really new in addressing the problems voters had identified. Thus, it seemed old, tired, and without new ideas or vision (H. Lee, 2015a). Some voters were critical of the way the PAP tried to hijack the campaign by constantly accusing the WP of wrongdoing in the management of its town council, in order perhaps to distract the voters from the PAP's own complicity in the creation of problems for Singapore and lack of ideas for solving them (Loh, 2015b).

Social media, a much less regulated space in Singapore with a tendency to be anti-establishment in its overall bias, has made even more explicit the PAP-establishment bias of the mainstream media. It has facilitated the aggregation and articulation of oppositional discourse against the PAP. It has engendered courage, to some degree from participation in conditions of semi-anonymity and pseudonymity, as well as from strength in numbers. It has served as an archive of materials, especially video materials, which could be searched and utilized to show error, contradiction, hypocrisy, and deception. While some PAP

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politicians engaged reasonably well within social media, a number of them found it rather challenging to relate in an iconoclastic style that was antithetical to literalness, seriousness, pompousness, and self-importance. Instead, faux pas were amplified and prolonged in social media.

Explaining the opposition vote

A number of opposition politicians, including Chee Soon Juan (Singapore Democratic Party, SDP), Paul Thambyah (SDP), and Leon Perera (WP), campaigned very effectively. Aside from superior oratorical skills, they showed charisma, empathy, emotional intelligence, and a gentlemanly demeanour (J. Tan, 2015). Even with impressive credentials such as PhDs and a double first from Oxford, these opposition personalities came across not as elitist but authentically sympathetic to the circumstances of ordinary life in Singapore. They excelled at giving speeches at the mass campaign rallies, where the opposition party were traditionally able to attract vastly larger crowds than the PAP.

While these personalities were fronting the public relations efforts, the WP and SDP in particular were able to produce consistent campaign messages in a disciplined way.

These messages appealed to more abstract arguments about checks and balances, but grounded them in 'bread-and-butter' issues that pragmatic Singaporeans cared mostly about. When the PAP argued abstractly against the role of opposition, it put forward somewhat less compelling reasons such as the ability of the PAP government to check itself. The opposition parties could point to immigration policies and the problems they have given rise to as examples of where the PAP logic of self-checking had failed (Loh, 2015a). The opposition parties were also able to demonstrate they could think outside of the box and come up with new and fresh ideas in their manifestos, while the PAP constantly referred to its track record of past success.

In social media, a more anarchic space where netizens feel more courageous and also impulsive about expressing their opinions, there seemed to be more support for the opposition and more criticism of the PAP. Defending the establishment was typically met with a barrage of ridicule and trolling.

Explaining the anti-opposition vote

The PAP took pains to highlight the lapses in the WP's management of the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC). The party's refusal to admit guilt was used to suggest to voters that the WP had a fundamental problem with integrity, an argument the PAP made emphatically and repeatedly. It also indicated a lack of fitness to govern at the national level. By going on the offensive and forcing WP to go on the defensive, the PAP successfully distracted voters from the national-level problems that the PAP had not been able to solve yet. This 'local government' electoral strategy seemed to work well in the PAP's favour.

Opposition politicians anywhere in the world have the luxury of criticizing policies without necessarily having to offer fully worked out policy alternatives. If they do advance alternatives, they often get away with doing so without having to explain and elaborate on trade-offs, feasibility of implementation, and financing. Thus, opposition rhetoric can raise suspicion of irresponsibly populist politics, making policy promises that could not be kept without unrealistic spending. This is a point often made by the PAP government. And even as the voters would acknowledge the high calibre of a few opposition personalities, they may also have concerns about the quality of most opposition candidates who have not proved themselves in the realm of policymaking and responsible leadership. Some voters may have also doubted the sincerity of the opposition candidates, many of whom appeared only during the election season and had not worked the ground sufficiently.

Some voters may not have been against having the PAP in power, but wanted to use their votes to signal strongly their disapproval of various PAP policies and actions. With all seats contested in GE2015, these voters may have been worried about a 'freak election' result in which the PAP lost so many seats that it would no longer command a majority in parliament to form an effective government. Ironically, the impressive performance by the opposition may have given these voters the impression that many other voters would be voting opposition, so they voted for the PAP instead.

Explaining the PAP vote

The fear factor, track record, and the mainstream media

More generally, risk-averse voters feared that Singapore would fail without the PAP in government, which was the only government that they had ever known. The language of vulnerability and survival, at the heart of Singapore's state-dominated public discourse, kept this type of fear alive. In 2015, Singaporeans were kept very aware of global terrorism and its closeness to home. Economic crisis was looming. And the country was hit by the worst trans-boundary haze from Indonesia in decades.

Some voters were confronted with a different kind of fear: that their vote was not really secret and that they or their family would be punished for voting against the PAP. This irrational fear arose out of an earlier more authoritarian history, when the PAP used different tools of political repression to eliminate its opponents. Today, the myth that the vote is not secret is convenient to the PAP (Jamal, 2015). Human rights group Maruah produced a video with members of the arts community to dispel the myth that the vote was not secret (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9SfvJn2uGM, accessed 11 September 2016). As reasonable as such arguments were, all it took was a lingering whiff of fear to prompt even the most level-headed voter not to take any chances.

Some voters favoured the PAP because of its track record of more than half a century in government. This impressive record of rapid growth and development

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had been lauded internationally, with Singapore topping the lists of several international ranking exercises. Not having been in government before, no opposition party could have had anywhere near a comparable track record.

Even though some have observed that the mainstream media has become more balanced over the years (T. H. Tan, 2015), it continued to be biased in their portrayal of the PAP. Their coverage of the GE2015 election campaign, for instance, was more sophisticated, but still obviously propagandistic, aimed at featuring the best of the PAP government and the worst of the opposition parties and politicians. The PAP was given credit for the good and others assigned blamed for the bad. This perpetuated the myth that there was no credible opposition and thus no credible alternative to the PAP in government. Even those who may have disliked the PAP for various reasons may still have been led to view the PAP as the lesser of evils.

LKY and SG50

GE2015 was special because it was the first fully contested general election in Singapore's history and the first one without LKY's towering participation. There was a roughly even balance between older (above 65 years) and younger (below 35 years) voters. The death of Singapore's first PM in March 2015 raised a groundswell of popular emotion, which included admiration, pride, gratitude, and sadness. The PAP may have achieved positive identification with the achievements and qualities of LKY and gained some political capital there. However, the association with LKY could also have opened up critical possibilities. The current PAP, it could be argued, did not compare favourably with the PAP of the founding generation of leaders. Their values, standards, goals, and achievements were different. For instance, the prospect of earning high salaries, it could be argued, would motivate this and future generations of PAP leaders differently. Drawing on the examples of policy failures, for instance, a narrative could have been constructed about how today's PAP government has lost its way and strayed from LKY's ideals and values.

The high-budget and high-profile jubilee year celebrations have also raised a popular groundswell of patriotic emotions, riding on a wave of nostalgic pleasures. These pleasures related to a politically sanitized version of the past that reinforced the PAP's leading role in Singapore's survival and progress. However, this nostalgic wave had the potential also to open up critical possibilities. There was already SG50¹ fatigue mid-way through the year-long celebrations. Some scepticism had been raised with regard to the huge resources that had gone into SG50 production, resources that could have been used to address the concerns that people had about the poor, access to social services, cost of living and doing business, and welfare in general. As discussed in Chapter 8, SG50 was also an opportunity for political dissidents and exiles, the PAP's opponents who became the losers of Singapore's history, to reappear, reclaim the national narrative, and re-politicize the past. But in hindsight, the PAP government's electoral prospects clearly benefitted from the LKY mystique and the wave of SG50 nostalgia.

Campaign messages and the leftward shift

The PAP's campaign messages were also consistent, focusing on the party's impressive track record, the character and integrity of its candidates (which it sought to contrast against opposition candidates by harping on the AHPETC issue, for example), the assurance that the party was listening to the people (most explicitly demonstrated in the year-long national-level public envisioning exercise *Our Singapore Conversation*, discussed in Chapter 7), and the importance of voting PAP in the interest of political leadership renewal and shaping the future of Singapore.

Many voters looked forward to 'goodies' presented in the budget of election years. In 2015, the Pioneer Generation Package benefitted 450,000 senior citizens who received lifetime help with their healthcare costs. This scheme, alongside other policies such as higher taxes on the top earners and a higher eligibility ceiling for public housing, seemed to indicate that the PAP government had become more open to directly redistributive policies, a change from its obsession with neoliberal economic growth. This has been interpreted as a shift to the left, which allowed the PAP government to not only demonstrate its willingness to listen to ordinary Singaporeans, but also outmanoeuvre the opposition parties in terms of their popular left-leaning policy positions, which the PAP government had often attacked as populist.

Popular PAP personalities

The PAP also had its share of popular politicians. Among the most well-liked and respected was Deputy PM Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who displayed keen intellect, wit, eloquence, and a sense of fairness. In spite of LKY's assertion that Singapore was not ready for a non-Chinese PM, many Singaporeans felt that he would be an excellent PM for Singapore. Lee Hsien Loong, the PM, was also popular, especially during the election campaign. For instance, he received cheers of approval when he spoke the heroic words of his father LKY during a lunchtime rally speech. He was probably the most skilful user of social media among the PAP politicians. In GE2015, Tharman's team won Jurong GRC with an impressive vote of 79.3 per cent and Lee's team won Ang Mo Kio GRC with an equally impressive 78.6 per cent.

Rules of the game

Singapore's formal institutions of representative government are a colonial legacy, fundamentally based on the Westminster system of parliamentary government. The executive has greater power than the legislature. Regularly held political elections since 1959, run according to the simple plurality voting system, have seen the PAP remain in power while a very small number of opposition politicians get elected to parliament. With an overwhelming majority in parliament, the PAP government has been able to amend the constitution

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without much obstruction, introducing multi-member constituencies (GRCs), unelected parliamentary membership, and other institutional changes that have in effect strengthened the government's electoral dominance and control of parliament. With incumbency comes electoral advantages that have further secured the PAP's position.

GRCs were introduced in 1988 to ensure that there would be adequate minority representation in parliament, to harness economies of scale in municipal administration, and to encourage moderate politics. Critics viewed them as a political manoeuvre to disadvantage opposition parties by making it even more challenging to field teams of credible candidates and by enabling the PAP to usher into parliament its own untested candidates through teams anchored by heavyweight ministers. Non-constituency members of parliament (NCMPs) were introduced in 1984. By appointing NCMPs from among the unsuccessful opposition candidates who won the highest number of votes in a general election, the scheme guarantees a minimum number of opposition MPs. Critics have noted that the scheme creates an incentive to vote for PAP candidates even if voters wanted more parliamentary opposition, given that there is already an automatic provision for ensuring a minimum number. Critics have also pointed out that NCMPs' limited voting powers do not extend to constitutional amendments, supply or supplementary bills, money bills, and motions of no confidence. In March 2011, just a couple of months before GE2011, the government passed amendments to reduce the number and size of GRCs and raise the number of NCMPs from three to nine. The government explained that these moves would make parliamentary elections fairer for all political parties while maintaining a system through which there could still be strong government. The fact that a PAP-held GRC helmed by a popular minister could be lost to the WP in GE2011 demonstrates how GRCs can be a double-edged sword.

Being the incumbent has also brought tremendous electoral advantages (M.S. Goh, 2015). The Electoral Boundaries Commission, overseen by the Prime Minister's Office, is responsible for redrawing constituency boundaries to better reflect changing demographics. Critics point to the barely disguised opportunities for gerrymandering. The incumbent has also allocated state funding for party political advantage, arguing that priority has to be given to PAP supporters. The promise of new infrastructure and estate upgrading can be a strong inducement to vote for the PAP. The Town Council Act also prevents the opposition from gaining full access to sinking funds and other governmental support if they were to take over a town council.

Explaining the results of GE2015

In the 'new normal' years leading to GE2015, the opposition was expected to make inroads into parliament. Voters, who had learnt how to signal their displeasure through the ballot box to get a desired government response, were expected to continue to apply this tactic. This did not happen. In the fully

contested elections, nearly 70 per cent of the electorate voted for the PAP, bringing 83 of its candidates into a parliament of 89 contested seats.

Observers may have overestimated the proportion of the electorate who objected to the PAP's elitist public image, insensitive gaffes, ideological rigidity, and policy failures enough to want to vote against the party. Quite possibly, each voter may have overestimated the extent to which other voters wanted to vote for the opposition, given how well the opposition seemed to be doing in the campaign period. So even if they were intending to vote against the PAP to signal displeasure and increase opposition voices in parliament, they might have decided, in a risk-averse way, not to do so to avoid a 'freak election' result that would overly weaken the PAP in government (Han, 2015). They might also simply have wanted to free-ride and let others do the opposition voting, so that their own constituencies could still enjoy all the advantages of being managed by a PAP town council, while other constituencies paid the price of voting for more opposition parliamentarians.

This interpretation is based on an assumption that the people were basically unhappy with the PAP government, but 70 per cent of them still voted for the PAP out of risk-aversion or as free-riders. It could well have been the case, however, that the people were happy with the basic policies in the first place or, if they had disagreements with them, they were satisfied to see the government making an effort to put in place changes to address problems that had been signalled strongly through the GE2011 vote. The electorate may have seen some improvements made in the areas of immigration, population, transport, Central Provident Fund (CPF) transparency, and cost of living, and gained confidence in the PAP; or these issues may not have been that serious a problem after all. The voters may have complained, but they understood the rationale behind the PAP government's neoliberal policies, appreciated its track record of success (as reinforced by the jubilee celebrations of SG50 and memories of LKY), and perhaps continued to have high hopes for trickle-down effects. In fact, several of the policies introduced during the new normal were uncharacteristically redistributive in nature, which signalled a cautious shift to the left, a move that might have stolen the opposition's thunder. Thus, one might conclude that the Singapore voters were smart and very tactical: punishing the PAP in GE2011 and then rewarding it in GE2015 when it paid greater attention to the needs of ordinary Singaporeans, all the while keeping the PAP securely in government (H. Lee, 2015b).

The PAP was also able to manage its public image better, presenting itself as listening to the people and empathizing with their needs. They worked the ground diligently. Many PAP politicians still appeared elite and insensitive in their behaviour. Many continued to make faux pas, especially in the tricky space of social media. But these few examples were turned into spectacles that disproportionately suggested the PAP was in trouble. Perhaps the larger electorate regarded these as trivial, and were able to look beyond them in considering their longer-term political interests and support the PAP's effort to assemble Singapore's fourth generation leadership.

If the results of GE2015 really reflected what the majority wanted, then the so-called 'liberal' voters remained in a minority and cyber-discourse did not reflect the wider sentiments of the electorate. As it turned out, the sensation of widespread opposition could have been an echo chamber effect, with the voices of a vocal minority amplified artificially (Foo, 2015). The impression that the PAP was doing really badly and the opposition really well was mostly false. In fact, for decades, the opposition's thunderous popularity in the campaign rallies was never a reliable indicator of how the electorate would vote. The vocal minority it seemed dominated the public imagination during the campaign period, but the silent majority made their views felt in the ballot box. This majority, it turned out, was conservative, risk-averse, and responsive to official history, nostalgia, and fear narratives. Thus, the campaign period was like a classic carnival: voters purged their frustration and angst in an exuberant anti-establishment display led by a vocal minority, and then proceeded with the business of normal life, much more sober, pacified, and even austere.

Both the WP and SDP were confronted with reduced margins in GE2015, in spite of some highly credentialed candidates and masterful speeches. Many voters may have admired these candidates and regarded them to be eminently electable, but the other opposition candidates standing in their constituencies were often much less impressive. It was also clear that the electorate cared about how well a party was able to manage a town council, as much as the extent to which its politicians could make credible, eloquent, and impassioned speeches in parliament. Uncertainty over AHPETC proved to be a great obstacle to the WP's prospects. Their candidates also needed more time to work the ground; a number of highly qualified candidates had been parachuted into candidacy. Structural disadvantages also mattered a great deal. The PAP's long-term incumbency has meant that it exerts strong influence over major institutions including the civil service, mainstream media, grassroots and voluntary sector, the labour movement, the military, and so on. The opposition has always had to fight an uphill battle.

A durable dominant party system

The new normal between GE2011 and GE2015 needs to be understood in terms of the historical trends shaping the conditions of possibility for political change. Singapore's history – and how that history has been interpreted, explained, and critiqued – shapes these conditions of possibility for its contemporary practices of politics, public administration, and civil society, and how the three relate to one another. It has, in fact, influenced the evolution of Singapore's political culture as a whole and thus must be considered critically in order to determine the durability of Singapore's dominant party system, especially in the post-LKY age.

The PAP has been continuously elected to power since 1959 when the British granted colonial Singapore self-governing status. After a short-lived political merger with Malaysia, Singapore attained full independence in 1965.

In the immediate years following independence, amid a climate of uncertainty and doubt about Singapore's viability as a sovereign nation-state, the government focused on basic questions of survival, acutely sensitive to its scarce resources and vulnerable circumstances. Government speeches and other public communications were often couched in hyperbole, a reflection of the urgency of mobilizing the masses behind a nation-building and national-development project.

The government quickly consolidated its power as a highly interventionist and entrepreneurial state whose coercive instruments were able to tame, co-opt, and train a once militantly unionized labour force. The economic bureaucracy was able to accelerate the course of economic and industrial development mostly by luring prospective foreign investors and multinational corporations (MNCs) with generous tax incentives, industrial infrastructure, and political stability. This outward-looking approach to national development and the apparent disinterest in assisting local capital could be explained by viewing the government, as Garry Rodan (1989: 98) has done, as 'averse to local Chinese capital' that 'had sympathies with some of the PAP's opponents'. By the 1970s and 1980s, like the other Asian 'tiger economies', Singapore's economy featured impressively high growth rates and incomes. During this period of 'high developmentalism', the achievement of significant success continued to be interpreted through the survivalist legacy as fragile and 'against the odds' of history, providing a constant warning against permanent threat and complacency. During this period, Singapore saw the rise of what Chan Heng Chee (1975) called an 'administrative state', a rationalized and highly technocratic mode of government, purified through the elimination of politics and democratic pressures from society and the market. The administrative state, in effect, depoliticized the people into a nation of producers and consumers. Michael Barr describes Singapore's technocracy, a legacy of this developmental period, as:

a Utopian vision of governance that presumes that the system is able to rise above subjective considerations of politics, ideology and sectional interests by relying on impartial reason and the technical skills of modern, highly trained professionals ... Rule in a technocracy is based on supposed impartial, objective criteria ...

(Barr, 2008: 396)

During this time, meritocracy became entrenched as a practice and set of institutions that productively and, for the most part, justly combined the virtues of socialist egalitarian concerns with capitalist values of allocative efficiency, competitiveness, and just rewards. The state enjoyed wide scope of authority and high capacity to deliver widespread material benefit. A prestigious public-sector scholarship system attracted the most academically gifted young Singaporeans into public service. In that ivory tower, high-flying technocrats were insulated from economic and social pressures, enabling them to formulate and implement highly rational and technocratic policies and programmes that contributed

greatly to Singapore's rapid development and growth. By demonstrating spectacular results and making palpable improvements to people's lives, the government gained substantial performance legitimacy, which became the hegemonic foundation of its authoritarianism in the form of a dominant party electoral system built on Westminster foundations. Continued economic success, according to this formula, required continued inflow of foreign investments, which in turn depended on socio-political stability that such an electoral system could ensure. Richard Stubbs's (2009) describes how Singapore has been characterized as an East Asian 'developmental state', how its strong state institutions have become embedded, and how its strong state capacity continues to be deemed necessary for continued economic success.

Newly embourgeoisied Singaporeans formed a middle class, increasingly affluent but still dependent on the paternalist state for employment as well as the continuance of their material well-being. The administrative state's successful performance overshadowed the well-meaning but amateur efforts of civil society to deliver social services, which then weakened it by making it seem redundant. Its more antagonistic elements continued to be suppressed along the logic of national survivalist strategies, mostly through detentions and arrests, but eventually through lawsuits. Thus, the consumer-lifestyle-oriented Singapore middle class did not, at first, function as the engine of liberal democratization as predicted by conventional theories of modernization (Jones and Brown, 1994).

By the 1990s, Singapore was becoming more entrenched in the logic and dynamics of neoliberal globalization. It aspired to be a global city of the top rank. Colin Crouch (2004) argues that the rise of global capitalism and the decline of progressive social forces has led to a transition to a post-democratic 'neoliberal' world, in which formal institutions of democracy, such as free, fair, and competitive elections, were transformed into mere spectacles of public life, concealing the concentration of real power in the privileged hands of the political and business elite. This elite operated in the private sphere relatively unrestrained. The people no longer participated in serious and effective political discussion, which meant that more egalitarian and socially progressive goals would be less achievable.

This façade of democracy may well describe Singapore in the present. David Harvey characterizes Singapore as both neoliberal and authoritarian, having:

combined neo-liberalism in the market place with draconian coercive and authoritarian state power while invoking moral solidarities based on ideals of a beleaguered island state (after its ejection from the Malaysian federation), of Confucian values, and most recently of a distinctive form of the cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade.

(Harvey, 2005: 86)

Making reference to the cases of China, South Korea, and Taiwan during their more dictatorial periods, Harvey argues that neoliberalism is perfectly compatible

with authoritarianism. Neoliberalism demands a certain sort of nationalism as a resource for neoliberal states to survive in a competitive globalized market.

It is the main task of this book to explore contemporary Singapore's complex neoliberal condition and what the prospects are for liberal democratization or political change more generally, as the nation/global city transitions into a new post-LKY age.

Note

1 The SG50 campaign was a government-led nationwide initiative to celebrate Singapore's 50th anniversary in 2015.

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