

# A 'NEW NORMAL': TOWARDS A ONE-AND-A-HALF PARTY SYSTEM?

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Amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore voters went to the polls on 10 July, 2020. That the People's Action Party (PAP) would return to power was never in doubt. It won a lion's share of 83 out of 93 parliamentary seats. General elections in Singapore, at least since 1968, have not really been about picking or changing a ruling party but have served instead as popular referenda on the performance of the perennial party in power, the PAP.

The PAP remains the long-term dominant party because it remains, for voters, the most credible political party.<sup>1</sup> It has the advantages of incumbency (including tinkering with the electoral rules of the game), is led by an effective and united leadership, able to attract talent, enjoys strong grassroots supports and faces only a relatively weak and fragmented opposition. The ruling party exercises strong economic stewardship and, over five decades in government, had amassed a huge financial war chest for the proverbial rainy day. Indeed, it had the wherewithal to dip into the national reserves and disburse an unprecedented S\$100 billion (US\$74.9 billion) to save jobs and stimulate the economy in the midst of the Covid-19 thunderstorm.

Notwithstanding, the PAP maintaining its one-party dominance in 2020 even as the main opposition party, the Workers' Party

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<sup>1</sup> 'Credibility of Parties' in IPS Post-Election Survey 2020, Institute of Public Policy, 21 Sep 2020.

(WP), made steady electoral inroads. The WP kept its seats at Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) and Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and won the new Sengkang GRC for a tally of ten seats, an increase of four from its previous electoral performance in 2015. In the constituencies it contested (all clustered in the eastern part of the city-state), the WP increased its vote share from 39.75% in 2015 to 50.49% just five years later.

But as a percentage of the national votes cast, the WP's share actually dipped from 12.48% to 11.22% because its strategy was to contest fewer constituencies and marshal its scarce resources to a few key electoral battlegrounds. This cautious strategy paid off handsomely. Despite its electoral gains, the WP's national vote share in 2020 was only 18.3% of the PAP's, revealing the huge gap between the top two political parties in Singapore.

## **GE2020 AS 'NEW NORMAL'**

GE2020 marked a 'New Normal' in Singapore politics—a conspicuous trend since GE2011, when the WP made a stunning breakthrough by capturing its first GRC in Aljunied. The characteristics of this New Normal are: falling vote and parliamentary seat share of the ruling PAP; the concomitant rise of a more competitive and credible political opposition; electoral contests in all constituencies (unlike the frequent walkovers in many constituencies before GE2011); a more diverse, pluralistic and demanding electorate occasioned by demographic change; value change amongst the young, including a desire for greater parliamentary checks and balances; and the primacy of independent social media and digital technology in political communication.

The New Normal of GE2020 confirms that GE2015, in which the PAP did exceptionally well, was an anomaly.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the PAP grabbed 69.9% of total votes cast and all seats (except Hougang and Aljunied). The three key reasons for the PAP's outstanding victory were: sympathy votes for the PAP after the demise of Singapore's Founding Father Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew in the same year; the halo effect of Singapore's bicentennial year; and the ruling party correcting much of its policy mistakes in public housing, mass transportation and foreign immigration which deeply angered many voters in GE2011. But in 2020, the ruling party's popular vote dipped sharply to 61.2%, its second worst performance, but still slightly better than the dismal 60.1% it obtained in GE2011.

By any global yardstick of electoral democracies, the PAP's capture of 89% of the seats—which translates into a more than two-thirds majority of Parliament and allows it to change the Constitution at will—was indeed a remarkable victory. Presumably, what worries the ruling party is the trending New Normal in Singapore politics for the next decade or two. If this trend gains momentum, then its narrow elitist and technocratic mode of governance (with little public accountability beyond periodic elections) will be increasingly challenged and eroded, if not rejected. The question remains whether the PAP can become less elitist and more open to alternative ideas to avoid alienating more pluralistic, better educated and more demanding younger voters not emotionally tied to the PAP.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In the next section, I argue that a New Normal in Singapore politics is unlikely—at least in the next decade or two—to lead to an incipient two-party system. A more probable evolution is a one-and-a-half party system. If this analysis is prescient, it means that the PAP will remain

2 'New Normal or Anomaly?: 2015 General Election and PAP's Electoral Landslide', in *Change in Voting: Singapore's 2015 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), 246–264.

as the perennial party in power, providing political stability and predictability but with the WP eventually winning close to half the PAP's seats and offering considerable checks and balances in Parliament. In this scenario, a stronger WP in opposition will prevent the ruling PAP from changing the Constitution at will since the latter will lack a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Following that I will analyse the electoral strategies of the main political parties in GE2020 and examine the value change of voters, focusing on the close contest between the PAP and WP in Sengkang GRC and the local factors that mattered amidst the broad sweep of value change among voters in Singapore. I conclude by arguing that the New Normal in Singapore politics is set to stay if the WP performs well as a responsible and moderate opposition party in Parliament and works assiduously at the grassroots between general elections.

Whether a one-and-a-half party system takes root in Singapore hinges not only on the WP acting as a capable and credible opposition party but also on the unity and performance of the PAP as a governing party not suffering from sclerosis (from being in power for too long) in the eyes of voters.

## **GE2020 AND A NASCENT ONE-AND-A-HALF PARTY SYSTEM**

The prediction of a two-party system (with two major parties rotating in power) fast emerging in Singapore is probably too sanguine. Instead, it is more likely that a one-and-a-half party system will crystallise in the next decade or two. The latter is a variation of a single-party dominant system in which a ruling party wins elections time after time and stays in power for three decades or more.<sup>3</sup> However, within the broad framework of a single-party dominant system, significant political change can still take place. This includes

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<sup>3</sup> TJ Pempel, *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1980).

the opposition parties strengthening and winning sufficient seats to prevent the ruling party from unilaterally amending the constitution.

If the political opposition were to capture at least half the seats currently held by the ruling party, it is likely that the former would demand a greater voice in legislation and greater representation in parliamentary sub-committees. In the case of Singapore, advisory Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) are filled by only PAP Members of Parliament (MPs). But if the political opposition grows in numbers—even in a single-party dominant system—the ruling party will be compelled by political reality and public pressure to include opposition MPs in deliberations of parliamentary select or sub-committees. In such a scenario, the ruling party will be obliged to consult, negotiate and compromise with the opposition party or parties for the smooth passage of legislation. If the dominant party were to simply to ram through unpopular legislation despite public disquiet, strong opposition party or parties may disrupt or boycott parliamentary proceedings. It would thus be in the interest of the ruling party to avoid a backlash from enraged citizens for being ‘dictatorial’ and risk being punished in the next general election.

A good example of a one-and-a-half party system is the Japanese party system between 1955 and 1993.<sup>4</sup> For close to four decades, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan won national elections time after time and was the perennial party in power. The Japan Socialist Party (JSP) was a permanent opposition in those years but generally won around half the number of seats as the LDP. The JSP was thus able to prevent the conservative LDP from changing the Japanese Constitution by denying it a two-thirds majority in Parliament. The JSP was also proportionately represented in the sub-committees of the lower and upper houses of the Japanese

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Scalapino and Junnosuke Masumi originated the concept of ‘one-and-a-half party system’. See Robert A Scalapino and Junnosuke Masumi, *Parties and Politics in Contemporary Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962).

parliament. To prevent the opposition JSP from disrupting the smooth passage of legislation, the ruling LDP would consult the JSP, grant minor concessions to the opposition in parliament and forge a consensus to pass bills.

Importantly, a two-party system does not preclude the presence of smaller parties even though its hallmark is two major political parties rotating in power.<sup>5</sup> In Japan, besides the two big parties—the LDP and JSP—there are also a few minor political parties.<sup>6</sup> It will be intriguing to see if the PAP's present single-party dominance evolves into a one-and-a-half party system within the next decade or two<sup>7</sup> and, as in the case of Japan, it is not inconceivable that a one-and-a-half party system in the city-state will see smaller minor parties emerge in Parliament as well. GE2020 might well have sown the seeds of a one-and-a-half party system in Singapore.

## **PARTY MANIFESTOS, STRATEGIES, CANDIDATES & NEW 'RULES OF THE GAME' AMID COVID-19**

Unlike elections past, there was no radical change to the electoral system or blatant gerrymandering in GE2020. Due to the necessity of observing social distancing during a deadly pandemic, physical mass rallies were banned. Hitherto, the opposition parties relied heavily on mass rallies for messaging and connecting with voters because they enjoyed less mainstream media coverage. In the absence of mass rallies, the default mode of political mobilisation for contesting parties in GE2020 was novel e-rallies, television and radio broadcasts and unprecedented live televised debates between the

5 The Conservative and Labour Parties rotate in power at the national level in Britain's two-party system. But there are important third parties like the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party.

6 These smaller third parties were the Japan Communist Party, Democratic Socialist Party and Komeito (Clean Government Party).

7 See Chew Hui Min, 'A 'one-and-a-half party' political system possible in Singapore, says political analyst', *CNA*, 2 Oct 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/a-one-and-a-half-party-political-system-possible-in-singapore-13170584> (accessed 16 Oct 2020). See also Rei Kurohi, 'Panellists discuss GE2020 survey, future of Singapore political system', *The Straits Times*, 2 Oct 2020.

PAP, WP, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and Progress Singapore Party (PSP). However, the banning of physical mass rallies opened a Pandora's box for the PAP. Though the opposition parties could no longer sway voters emotionally in large rallies, their younger candidates, generally savvy with digital technology, took advantage of social media to appeal to the younger voters.

## **PAP: COVID-19 MANIFESTO**

The PAP's manifesto was solid but staid.<sup>8</sup> It emphasised the party's good track record of governance, appealed for a strong mandate to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic to save lives and livelihoods and affirmed the leadership renewal of presumptive prime minister Heng Swee Keat and his fourth generation (4G) team. PM Lee said that the central focus of the PAP's manifesto was "how we will work together to overcome this crisis of a generation".<sup>9</sup> He highlighted three issues: "keeping Singaporeans and migrant workers safe from Covid-19 and keeping the disease from overwhelming the healthcare system; restarting and transforming the economy; and providing care and support to Singaporeans amid the uncertainty and dangers."<sup>10</sup>

Lee also mentioned that the number of new candidates fielded in GE2020 was higher than the party's usual rate of one quarter renewal at each general election. The slate of new candidates comprised 11 women, more than double the five fielded in GE2015. He also noted that the PAP had cast its net wider to catch new candidates with more diverse backgrounds. Hitherto, the PAP recruited heavily from the elite civil service and military 'scholars' for its candidates.

8 People's Action Party, 'PAP Manifesto 2020: Our Lives, Our Jobs, Our Future', <https://issuu.com/pap.sg/docs/pap-manifesto-2020-our-lives-our-jobs-our-future> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

9 Danson Cheong, 'Singapore GE2020: PM Lee Hsien Loong unveils PAP's manifesto, focus is on working together to overcome Covid-19 crisis', *The Straits Times*, 27 Jun 2020.

10 Ibid.

The tone of the PAP's GE2020 manifesto was one of sobriety given Singapore's greatest economic crisis since its independence. But there was nothing new—not least a move to becoming a more open, transparent and accountable form of governance that would respond better to a more pluralistic and better educated voters beyond periodic elections. Neither was there a new economic model that would rely significantly less on foreign labour and immigration, nor an environmental model that addressed climate change through the greater adoption of renewable forms of energy. Indeed, the PAP manifesto had little to say either about the 'post-material' aspirations and concerns of younger voters who desired greater voice and transparency in governance and genuine political checks and balances. They now had to deal with a generation socialised by Singapore's state schools, a generation that had grown up reciting the national pledge at school assemblies across the island to 'build a democratic society, built on justice and equality'.

Neither were the material concerns and fears of Singaporeans living in public housing addressed nor assuaged by the PAP's manifesto. About 83% of Singaporeans live in public housing. In the run-up to the election, there arose grave concerns that once the 99-year leases on Housing Development Board (HDB) flats run out, flat-owners would see their monetary investments plummet to zero. Indeed, these owners are worried that their flats, many of which have less than 50 years left on their leases, will concomitantly depreciate as their leases run down. In past elections, the PAP promised estate upgrading and asset appreciation of HDB flats for retirement nest eggs to attract electoral support. However, a majority of Singaporeans were now staring at the asset depreciation of their homes in the long run. Yet the PAP remained curiously silent and offered no solution to this ticking time bomb of expiring HDB leases.



There were also no promises to genuinely reduce social inequality in the PAP's manifesto. Nothing much was said about the future economic model of how to build a prosperous Singapore without heavy reliance on foreign labour and immigration. Simply put, the PAP's GE2020 manifesto focused on the immediate Covid-19 crisis but lacked an inspiring and bold vision of the future for younger and more idealistic Singaporeans. Presumably, the PAP focused on mitigating the pandemic to highlight the competence and dedication of its leaders to save lives and livelihoods.

A precedent for voters fleeing to safety (viewing the PAP as a safe pair of hands) had occurred during GE2001, which was held in November when many Singaporeans were shocked by the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City. The tragedy triggered a global economic recession and security concerns in the epoch of terrorism. The PAP won a landslide victory in the 2001 election, with 75.3% of the popular votes and 82 out of 84 parliamentary seats. Indeed, many opposition supporters in GE2020 feared an electoral wipeout if voters 'fled to safety' again.

During the GE2020 campaign, Minister of Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing warned of a possible freak election resulting with the PAP being voted out of power if Singaporeans blindly supported the opposition for opposition's sake.<sup>11</sup> However, voters generally ignored Chan's prognostication, taking his statements as nothing more than a fear-mongering tactic. Results from a public opinion poll conducted shortly after GE2020 by the Institute of Public Policy showed that the daily user interactions with Covid-19 Facebook posts by local media outlets had fallen very sharply from peaks seen in April 2020.<sup>12</sup>

11 The media reported: "During a dialogue organised by Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao [...] Mr Chan said that the three largest opposition parties, the PSP, the Worker's Party (WP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) could possibly replace the Government after the general election." See Lester Wong, 'Singapore GE2020: Very unlikely that opposition can form the government, says Tan Cheng Bock', *The Straits Times*, 3 Jul 2020.

12 Cindy Co, 'GE2020 results less surprising if parties paid attention to Facebook interactions, says researcher', *CNA*, 8 Oct 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/ge2020-results-less-surprising-parties-paid-attention-facebook-13230140> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

The survey noted that by Nomination Day and Polling Day, public interest in Covid-19 on Facebook had “dipped to levels not seen since the beginning of the year”.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that interest in the central plank in the PAP’s manifesto, that is, its able handling of the Covid crisis, had waned among voters by July 2020. By this time, voters clearly had other pressing concerns and were probably psychologically worn out and turned off by daily reminders of the pandemic that stretched into the election campaign.

The power of the social media became obvious when PAP candidate Ivan Lim quit after a firestorm over online allegations that he was elitist and arrogant in his military and civilian careers. Unfortunately for the PAP, the hullabaloo and negativity over Ivan Lim threatened to overshadow its 2020 manifesto of saving jobs and lives just before the official campaign began. In contrast, the WP coped better with the challenge of a new social media milieu.

## **WP: FIGHTING A SMART CAMPAIGN IN GE2020**

The WP entered the GE2020 campaign as an underdog. First, its long-serving, charismatic Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang did not stand for re-election, making way for his successor, the much younger Pritam Singh, and to ensure smooth leadership renewal. Second, the WP team at Aljunied GRC led by Pritam Singh and Party Chairwoman Sylvia Lim was under a cloud over the alleged financial mismanagement of the Aljunied–Hougang Town Council (AHTC). In October 2019, the media reported:

In his judgment, Justice Ramesh found Mr Low, the former WP secretary-general, and Ms Lim, the party chairman, as well as WP’s new chief Pritam Singh, liable for damages suffered

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13 Ibid.

by AHTC, which is said to have made millions in improper payments under their watch.<sup>14</sup>

The saga hung like the proverbial sword of Damocles over the WP team. If the defendants were unable to pay the damages awarded, AHTC could commence bankruptcy proceedings against them. This meant the possibility of them losing their parliamentary seats since undischarged bankrupts cannot be MPs nor contest in parliamentary elections. However, Low, Lim and Singh filed notices of appeal and, for the time being, nullified this potential threat.

To bolster its stronghold in Aljunied, the WP moved Gerald Giam and Leon Pereira (both of whom stood as candidates in the East Coast GRC in GE2015) to run for Aljunied in July 2020. Fearing the worst, the WP's strategy in 2020 was contesting in fewer constituencies (compared to GE2015) to channel its resources to just a few constituencies. Pritam Singh appealed to voters for support by flagging the danger of an opposition wipeout.<sup>15</sup> Before polling day, Pritam's clever use of reverse psychology proved successful because many believed that voters would, as they had previously, flee into the safe arms of the PAP in this pandemic crisis.

The tone of the WP's 2020 manifesto was moderate and measured. It proposed the provision of more welfare to needy and older Singaporeans and increased access to a good education for children from poorer families. It included more relaxed granting of citizenship to foreign spouses of Singaporeans; a universal HDB lease buyback scheme by the state; a single-use plastics charge to curb plastic use; a freedom of information law; an independent Elections Department and Electoral Boundaries Review Committee; and a national minimum wage and redundancy

14 Tham Yuen-C and Rachel Au-Yong, 'AHTC case: Workers' Party leaders put political interests above that of town council and residents, says judge', *The Straits Times*, 11 Oct 2019.

15 Linette Lai, 'Singapore GE2020: WP using fear of opposition wipe-out to win seats, says Heng Swee Keat', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2020.

insurance scheme.<sup>16</sup> The WP manifesto declared that close relatives and current or former party colleagues of political office-holders should not be appointed to key positions in national institutions such as organs of state, national media companies and sovereign wealth funds.

This manifesto had sufficient content to appeal to both voters who subscribed to material and post-material values. The WP did its homework to reel in diverse voters, both young and old from across different social classes. Besides an attractive manifesto, the WP was able to present slates of candidates who could match many new PAP candidates in quality. This was a key to its electoral success in 2020.

### **PSP: Tan Cheng Bock as Anchor**

Former PAP MP Dr Tan Cheng Bock founded the PSP in 2019 as an alternative voice in Parliament. Earlier, he quit his old party and almost won the 2011 Singapore Presidential Election in a tightly fought contest against former PAP Chairman and Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tony Tan. In November 2016, the PAP government amended the Constitution to provide for a presidential election to be reserved for candidates of a particular racial group if there had been no president from the group in the five most recent presidential terms. The first election, reserved for Malays, saw former PAP Speaker of the House Halimah Yacob sworn in as President in September 2017. To the disappointment of many Singaporeans, there was no presidential contest because few aspiring Malay candidates could meet the strict criteria of candidacy.<sup>17</sup> Some critics viewed the PAP's unilateral constitutional amendment as politically motivated

16 Rei Kurohi, 'Singapore GE2020: Key proposals in Workers' Party manifesto', *The Straits Times*, 29 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/key-proposals-in-workers-party-manifesto> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

17 The Presidential Elections Committee (PCC) must assess whether candidates are persons of integrity, good character and reputation. Candidates must also have held certain key government appointments or were the chief executives of companies with shareholders' equity of an average of S\$500 million.

to prevent Tan Cheng Bock from running again in a presidential election and becoming an elected president to check on Lee Hsien Loong's administration, and be a thorn in the flesh.

In December 2017, Tan declared that he would mentor aspiring politicians across the political divide to win elections. In the following year, Tan offered to lead a grand coalition of opposition parties to resist the PAP. Initially, many opposition parties, except the WP, were interested in this scheme. However, it was politically unrealistic and naïve to think that Singapore's top opposition party with representation in Parliament and strong grassroots organisations at Hougang and Aljunied constituencies would accept the mentorship of an erstwhile PAP MP. Tan Cheng Bock's quest for opposition unity failed because of different outlooks, styles, interests, personalities and egos among the opposition parties.

The PSP also attracted attention and created a buzz amongst Singaporeans when Lee Hsien Yang, the estranged younger brother of PM Lee Hsien Loong, became a PSP member and campaigned for the opposition party. Both Tan and Lee Hsien Yang charged that the PAP under Lee Hsien Loong had abandoned the PAP's past principles of good governance and had now "lost its way". Ironically, Lee Hsien Yang campaigned on the values of the 'old' PAP, helmed by his father Lee Kuan Yew. The reality is that Singapore has moved on as a nation and the Lee Hsien Loong-led Singapore is actually more open and less restrictive than the authoritarian era of Lee Kuan Yew. In 2020, both Tan and Lee Hsien Yang advocated for greater accountability and transparency in the Singapore system especially for appointments to various public institutions. They asked why the salary of Ho Ching, the Prime Minister's wife and the chief executive officer of sovereign wealth fund Temasek Holdings, remained a secret.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Tham Yuen-C, 'Good governance eroding, says Tan Cheng Bock', *The Straits Times*, 27 Jul 2019 (accessed 1 Oct 2020).

The PSP's 2020 manifesto was cogent and succinct, with appeals to voters with material concerns and post-material aspirations.<sup>19</sup> It focused on bread and butter issues including limiting the number of foreign workers who may compete with Singaporeans for jobs, a minimum wage for Singaporeans and premiums for the basic health insurance plan MediShield Life to be paid for by the state. The manifesto also called for a review of free trade agreements, especially those that touch on labour exchange, such the Singapore–India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA). This agreement was a source of unhappiness among many Singapore PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) who feared that CECA threatened their livelihoods. There was also a perception that some Indian companies tended to unfairly hire only their own nationals at the expense of Singaporeans.

The PSP also called for the en bloc redevelopment of all public housing to solve the problem of depleting leases. For the post-materialists, the PSP advocated the freedom of speech and expression. The manifesto promised that, if elected, the PSP would review the controversial Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), Singapore's anti-fake news law which was passed in May 2019. Critics of POFMA claim that it suppresses free speech in Singapore.

The PSP did well in GE2020. It contested 24 seats and captured 40.85% of the votes it fought for. Anchored by Tan Cheng Bock, the PSP team came close and clinched 48.32% of the vote share in West Coast GRC. By being the 'best losers', the PSP won the consolation prize that entitled them to place two of its candidates as Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs). One wonders whether the PSP might have beaten the PAP in West Coast

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19 'GE 2020 Manifesto by Progress Singapore Party: For Country For People', <https://psp.org.sg/ge2020-manifesto-by-progress-singapore-party-for-country-for-people/> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

in a photo finish if the former had fielded fewer candidates and concentrated on its campaign in West Coast GRC.

To be sure, Tan Cheng Bock was the only PSP candidate who is a household name. The only other PSP member who is a household name is Lee Hsien Yang but he chose not to put himself forward as a candidate in GE2020. Could Lee Hsien Yang have tipped the scale if he had stood in Tan's team in West Coast GRC? It is not inconceivable that a Tan-Lee combo in a PSP line-up might have pipped the PAP across the line, but that is mere speculation. Other than Tan, the PSP did not have any candidates with sufficient star quality. Two of the PSP's younger stalwarts, Michelle Lee and Ravi Philemon, quit to form the Red Dot United to contest the Jurong GRC in GE2020. The PSP representatives at the e-national debates proved rather lacklustre compared to those from other parties.

The future of the PSP might well be bleak. Tan Cheng Bock was 80 years of age in 2020 and probably will not run in the next general election because of age. It is unclear whether the PSP can attract more able and younger party members or indeed even survive, let alone thrive, without Tan Cheng Bock. The PSP does not have any deep organisational roots and is probably a shooting star in GE2020. It has a credible old war horse in Tan Cheng Bock but the PSP is unlikely to progress once he leaves the political arena.

## **SDP: Performing Beyond Mainstream Expectations**

Anticipating a snap election, the SDP launched its GE2020 manifesto in September 2019. In early 2020, the SDP crystallised its key platform into a '4 Yes, 1 No' campaign—Yes to suspending the GST hike till the end of 2021, paying retrenchment insurance, providing low-income retirees with income support and putting the people first; and No to increasing Singapore's population to

10 million “on our already overcrowded island”.<sup>20</sup> Its detailed manifesto sought to appeal to voters with both material interests and post-material values.

The Party’s vote share, based on the 11 seats it contested in GE2020, was only 37.04%. However, SDP Chairman Professor Paul Tambyah garnered 46.26% of the votes in Bukit Panjang SMC while SDP Secretary-General Dr Chee Soon Juan won 45.20% of the votes in Bukit Batok SMC. This was Chee’s best result at the polls since he first stood as an SDP candidate at the 1992 Marine Parade GRC by-election. In GE2020, Chee concentrated on municipal issues and problems of residents at Bukit Batok.

At the first GE debate between the PAP, SDP, WP and PSP, Dr Chee did well to raise at least two issues—structural elitism, class cleavages and unfairness in Singapore where the best schools are clustered in the affluent Bukit Timah area, and ‘No’ to a population size of 10 million. While top PAP debater and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan sidestepped the problem of unlevel playing fields for children by saying that every school in Singapore is a good school, he rebuked Chee and stated that the PAP Government did not have a fixed population target of 10 million. Earlier in the month, the POFMA Office had issued correction directions against the SDP’s Facebook pages for an alleged false statement that the CEO of the HDB had suggested Singapore’s population will increase to 10 million by 2030.

Infuriated that Chee was rehashing a ‘falsehood’, the PAP began attacking his character. But to many Singaporeans, population size is an important issue worthy of national debate and they deemed what Chee said to be a fair comment in politics. Indeed, the PAP had remained silent on what the likely population projection by

20 Samuel Woo, ‘GE2020: The Singapore Democratic Party’, *TODAY*, 30 Jun 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ge2020-singapore-democratic-party> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).



2030 or 2040 would be. One may ask: If the population is going to be significantly less than 6.9 million by 2030, is it likely to be less or more than 6.2 million? Singapore's population was approximately 5.7 million in 2019. What is the country's absorptive capacity for new citizens, permanent citizens and those on long-term visit passes? There was public disquiet because the 2013 Population White Paper mentioned the figure of 6.9 million by 2030. But the PAP Government clarified during the 2013 Parliamentary Debate on the Population White Paper that the 6.9 million population figure in 2030 was not a target but a planning parameter for the purpose of land use and infrastructure planning.

The media reported that the PAP “has expressed its disappointment at the Singapore Democratic Party and its two leaders, Dr Chee Soon Juan and Dr Paul Tambyah, for misleading voters with a ‘mythical’ 10 million projected population figure for Singapore and refusing to say sorry for that.”<sup>21</sup> The PAP said:

We are disappointed that Dr Chee and the SDP have dug their heels in, repeated their falsehoods, and refused to apologise to Singaporeans for misleading them. Disappointed but not surprised, for we knew Dr Chee has not changed, cannot change, and will never change.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the PAP said it was “surprised” that Dr Tambyah would join in a “charade”. The PAP then attacked Tambyah: “We thought he was a better man.”<sup>23</sup> However, some voters could not help but be convinced that the PAP had not changed, seeing how they reverted to their pattern of launching ad hominem attacks against

21 Janice Lim, ‘GE2020: PAP says SDP’s Chee Soon Juan hasn’t changed, expected better of Paul Tambyah in dispute over ‘10m population’ claim’, *TODAY*, 4 Jul 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ge2020-pap-says-sdp-chee-soon-juan-hasnt-changed-expected-better-paul-tambyah-population-dispute> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

its political opponents. Such nasty and bullying behaviour did not endear the PAP to the millennial voters. Moreover, that the ruling party and its proxies could unilaterally slap POFMA on the SDP but not the other way around appeared to be manifestly unfair.

## **THE SINGAPORE ELECTORATE: VALUE CHANGE TOWARDS A ONE-AND-A-HALF PARTY SYSTEM?**

In GE2020, the ruling PAP was caught between the pincers of material concerns and insecurity of voters amid Covid-19 and the post-material aspirations of younger, better-educated, more pluralistic and idealistic voters. Minister of Education Lawrence Wong (also one of the two ministers dealing daily with the pandemic) did a post-mortem shortly after GE2020 and candidly acknowledged the fear and hurt of the sandwiched generation who suffered most from the economic disruption of Covid-19.<sup>24</sup>

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy conducted a scientific post-2020 election survey of 4,000 respondents<sup>25</sup> which gave us a valuable snapshot of the Singapore electorate on values and issues. Together with the IPS' 2011 and 2015 post-election surveys, the time series revealed the electorate's value change over a decade, including the desire for greater checks and balances in the political system, and more voices in Parliament.

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24 Ng Jun Sen, 'GE2020: Middle-aged voters, not youths, accounted for national vote swing against PAP, says Lawrence Wong', *TODAY*, 18 Jul 2020, [https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ge2020-middle-aged-voters-not-youths-accounted-national-vote-swing-against-pap-says?cid=h3\\_referral\\_inarticlelinks\\_03092019\\_todayonline](https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ge2020-middle-aged-voters-not-youths-accounted-national-vote-swing-against-pap-says?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_03092019_todayonline) (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

25 The data of this section relies on the IPS 2020 Election Survey. I am grateful to be given a preview of the data by IPS when it was officially embargoed until evening of 1 October 2020. See also Institute of Policy Studies, Forum on the IPS Post-Election Survey on GE2020, 1 Oct 2020, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/events/details/forum-on-the-ips-post-election-survey-on-ge2020> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

## I. Issues

How were issues ranked in importance by voters? While the Government's handling of Covid-19 was deemed very important, voters ranked two issues—the need for efficient government and fairness of government policy—higher than concerns about the pandemic. On par with the handling of Covid-19 were two other issues—the need for checks and balances in Parliament (post-material value), and the cost of living (material issue). Though the PAP's 2020 manifesto focused on Covid-19, the IPS survey revealed that this was not the most important issue on voters' minds.

## II. Candidates' Traits

According to voters, the most desirable characteristics of candidates (as proxies of political parties) are, in descending order: (1) honesty; (2) fairness; (3) being hardworking and committed; and efficiency. Interesting, voters ranked fairness, which they deemed very important for public policy, above party and candidates' traits. Implicitly, the issue of fairness is also intertwined with elitism in Singapore. The PAP has to be mindful that its elitism cannot be seen as blatantly unfair by a majority of voters in the years ahead. This would explain why there was a social media backlash by thousands of Singaporeans against Ivan Lim's alleged elitism. As mentioned earlier, this backlash forced him to withdraw as a PAP candidate in GE2020.

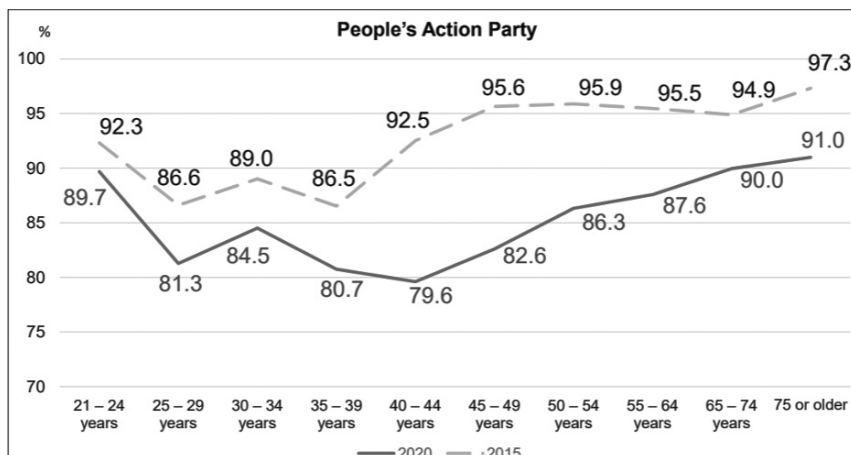
## III. Credibility of Political Parties: PAP as Number One, WP Fast Catching Up, SDP Improving

Though the PAP was deemed the most credible party by respondents, the percentage of those who agreed dipped from 93% in 2015 to 86% in 2020. Its lowest credibility rating was 73%

in 2011, when there was palpable anger among many voters on issues of public housing, transportation and immigration. What is worrisome for the PAP is that its credibility is relatively lower amongst younger voters than those belonging to the older Pioneer (those born on or before 31 December 1949) and Merdeka (those born on or before 31 December 1959) voters.

The IPS Survey indicated a 12.9% fall in credibility rating amongst 40- to 44-year-olds, a 13% plunge in credibility rating among 45- to 49-year-olds and a dip of 9.6% among 50- to 54-year-olds (see Figure 1). These age cohorts are the sandwich generation, who have to take care of children and ageing parents, pay housing mortgages, are subject to foreign competition and, most recently, hit by the disruption of Covid-19. If the PAP's credibility keeps trending downwards, even when the pandemic is over, the PAP may well lose its two-third majority in Parliament within the next decade or two.

Figure 1: Credibility Rating



Source: IPS 2020 Post-Election Survey

In the case of the WP, its credibility grew significantly in each successive general election: 56% in 2011, 69% in 2015 and 79% in

2020. If this trend persists in the next few general elections, then a one-and-a-half party system will coalesce in Singapore. The SDP has also made marked improvement in its credibility among voters within a decade. It was 24% in 2011, 46% in 2015 and 45% in 2020. The party still has a long way to go to gain the trust of Singaporeans. If a majority of voters eventually perceive the SDP to be credible, then it may become the third, albeit smallest party in Parliament in a one-and-a-half party system.

#### **IV. A Case Study: WP's Upset Victory at Sengkang GRC with 52.13% Vote Share**

The WP made an electoral breakthrough at Sengkang and found a winning formula to capture another GRC in GE2020: a balanced slate of credible candidates with hearts and brains who could appeal to the material and post-material values of Singaporeans across class, ethnicity, age and gender. If such a scenario comes to pass, then a one-and-a-half party system will take root in Singapore.

As a new GRC, Sengkang proved to be a more level playing field for the opposition. It is a new and well-managed estate with fairly new public housing. The new GRC has two modern shopping malls and good transportation connectivity (both Mass Rapid Transit [MRT] and Light Rail Transit [LRT] rail systems and a bus interchange). The majority of its electorate are young couples<sup>26</sup>—a profile favourable to the young WP team, though value change among voters did not automatically translate into a WP victory. Indeed, it was a convergence of clever party strategy, a balanced slate of strong candidates, doggedness and a scintillating performance by WP team

26 The media noted: "Data from the Singapore Department of Statistics show that Sengkang residents are younger than the national average: More than 65 per cent of residents are aged below 45 and less than 10 per cent are aged above 65." See Daryl Choo, Lena Loke and Nabilah Awang, 'GE2020: Sengkang residents give reasons they plumped for WP, including a better connection with its candidates', *TODAY*, 12 Jul 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ge2020-sengkang-residents-give-reasons-why-they-plumped-wp-including-better-connection-candidates> (accessed 16 Oct 2020).

member Jamus Lim at a party debate that resonated with many voters. With hindsight, the PAP's electoral strategy for Sengkang was deeply flawed.

The fundamental problem of the PAP's strategy at Sengkang was sending National Trade Union Congress Labour Chief and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Ng Chee Meng to the new GRC barely half a year before GE2020. Ng, 51 years old, was a former Chief of Defence Force of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and held the rank of Lieutenant General. He was first fielded in the Pasir Ris–Punggol GRC and won in GE2015. Ng was also Second Minister for Transport. For all his sterling credentials, Ng had little time to familiarise himself with Sengkang GRC, prepare for his electoral battle and connect with the locals. The PAP campaign strategists made the same mistake by transferring Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Health Amrin Amin (aged 41) from his old Sembawang GRC to Sengkang with hardly any time to get to know the new ground and connect with Sengkang residents.

Surprisingly, the PAP did not field any young female candidates at Sengkang GRC, even though the electorate primarily comprises young working women. That the unbalanced PAP slate at Sengkang comprised only middle-aged men was a blunder of the PAP campaign strategists. The other two PAP candidates at Sengkang were not particularly strong ones—Raymond Lye (aged 54), a newbie and grassroots leader unknown in Sengkang beyond his immediate ward of Punggol East, and Senior Minister of State for Transport Dr Lam Pin Min (aged 50). The Transport portfolio was a poisoned chalice for PAP ministers. There seemed no light at the end of the tunnel insofar as transport woes go, with frequent and maddening breakdowns in MRT and LRT, much to the chagrin of Singaporean voters who expect first-world governance from the

world's best-paid ministers. There was also much unhappiness when personal mobility devices (PMDs or e-scooters) were banned from roads and footpaths at the end of 2019 because of serious accidents with pedestrians. Lam had to explain the Government's rationale for the ban in a heated dialogue with angry PMD riders. Many of them felt that the ban jeopardised their livelihoods as delivery riders. Lam and Ng were 'fall guys' for the unreliability of public transportation for irate commuters in Sengkang.

Sengkang GRC is not totally new to the WP as it had absorbed the former Punggol East SMC won by the WP in a 2013 by-election triggered by the resignation of Speaker Michael Palmer following a scandal over his alleged marital infidelity. In GE2015, PAP MP and old war horse Charles Chong won back this SMC with a narrow 51.76% of the votes, though the PAP won 69.9% nationwide. Simply put, the WP was more familiar with Punggol East and had grassroots activities and 'retail politics' since 2013.

The WP team of four was a balanced one and oozed quality—two females, and as articulate about bread and butter issues as with post-material concerns. Their local manifesto included more childcare facilities, coffee shops, provision shops, common facilities and expanding cycling path networks, and post-material issues like fairness and the need to reduce social inequality, greater checks and balances in parliament and dealing with climate change. Their local manifesto was bolder and edgier than the PAP's.

The WP's Sengkang candidate Jamus Lim (an economist with World Bank experience, aged 44) was the star at the GE2020 debate who made the clarion call—"No blank cheque for the PAP!" His public persona was articulate, affable and unflappable. The 'Jamus effect' undeniably swept through Sengkang after the televised political debates. He had an eight-month old daughter

in July 2020. Fellow WP candidate He Ting Ru (a Cambridge-educated lawyer educated, aged 37) was no political novice. She ran on the WP ticket for Marine Parade GRC in GE2015. She has two young children and appealed to female voters sharing the same concerns of child rearing. He Ting Ru came across as smart, earnest and humble. Louis Chua (Singapore Management University graduate, aged 33) is an equity research analyst with a global investment bank. Chua was an unknown with a nine-month-old son. He advocated greater diversity and dissenting views to build a more resilient society, and his values gelled with many young post-materialists at Sengkang. WP's final candidate for Sengkang Raeesah Khan, aged 26, was a social enterprise founder who focused on underprivileged families, survivors of sexual abuse, migrant workers and refugee issues. Raeesah has a 12-month-old daughter. She was mired in controversy during GE2020 because her Facebook postings on race, fairness and elitism offended many conservative and older Singaporeans who felt that nonchalantly airing such insensitive remarks threatened Singapore's harmonious multicultural society.

Khan's Facebook post claimed that the Singapore law enforcement authorities discriminated against minorities and alleged that 'rich Chinese' and 'white people' were treated differently under the law. In another post on the 2018 City Harvest Church ruling, she implied that the judiciary was biased toward Christian leaders. She subsequently said that her intention was 'never to cause social divisions but to raise awareness on minority issues' and regretted making her 'insensitive' comments.<sup>27</sup> However, many younger Singaporeans (including ethnic minorities) supported her because they were more used to the freewheeling ethos of social media

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<sup>27</sup> Tham Yuen-C and Rei Kurohi, 'Singapore GE2020: WP candidate Raeesah Khan apologises for 'insensitive' remarks in posts', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2020.



and felt that there were indeed issues of unfairness towards ethnic minorities and the poor in Singapore. Some also found the PAP's criticisms of her heavy handed. On polling day, the voters had the last say and the WP won a famous victory at Sengkang GRC.

## CONCLUSION

GE2020 may turn out to be the harbinger of a one-and-a-half party system in Singapore. Presumably, the PAP would prefer a one-and-a-quarter party system, with the opposition as sparring partners in Parliament but lacking the numbers to block them from amending the Constitution at will. There are two key reasons why a 'one-and-a-half party system' may well emerge. First is the value change in the Singapore electorate with higher post-material aspirations of fairness in the political system, and the desire for greater checks and balances and different views in Parliament. Second, is the rising credibility of the top opposition parties. This trend will gain momentum if they behave in a moderate way that is acceptable to the electorate, leverage on social media to promote alternative views, engage in 'retail politics', and attract younger and better candidates in greater numbers to join its ranks.

The PAP will have to accept this New Normal in Singapore politics. If the ruling party unfairly resorts to POFMA to silence its critics, engages in blatant gerrymandering in the next general election, brazenly remakes the Elected Presidency, or cynically uses taxpayer money to prioritise the estate upgrading of PAP constituencies, a fierce backlash from a younger generation of voters (who value pluralism and fair play) will further erode its political dominance and polarise the country.



*Pritam Singh, leader of the Workers' Party, who would go on to assume the positions of Leader of the Opposition and Opposition Whip.*