

A NON-ISSUE AT GE2020: THE OPPOSITION, TOWN COUNCILS AND GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS

Jason Lim

INTRODUCTION

During the 2015 general election campaign, the People's Action Party (PAP) attacked the Workers' Party (WP) by criticising its financial management of Aljunied–Hougang Town Council (AHTC).¹ The AHTC managed the municipal affairs of the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) which the WP had won in GE2015, albeit with reduced popular support. The AHTC saga continued after GE2015 was over.

By the time GE2020 came around, it looked like the WP would lose both constituencies. The Auditor-General's Office (AGO) found that the AHTC had lapses in corporate governance and compliance with government regulations. An independent panel acting on behalf of AHTC then proceeded to sue Low Thia Khiang, Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh—the three WP Members of Parliament (MPs) for Aljunied GRC—and five other defendants. Despite the fact that the High Court found the three WP MPs liable on some counts,² the WP

1 Jason Lim, 'Political Developments After the 2011 General Election', in *Voting in Change: The Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 38–39.

2 See *Aljunied-Hougang Town Council & Anor v Lim Swee Lian Sylvia & Ors and Another Suit* [2019] SGHC 241.

retained Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC. This chapter looks at the challenges faced by opposition MPs in managing their constituencies, largely due to town council management, the role of PAP-appointed advisors in their constituencies' grassroots organisations, and the less than expected impact of the AHTC litigation case for the WP in GE2020.

THE OPPOSITION AND GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS

To understand the challenges faced by the opposition parties in managing their constituencies, we need to look back at history, to when Singapore attained full internal self-government in 1959. That year, the PAP won the general election in a landslide victory and Lee Kuan Yew was sworn in as Prime Minister amidst Cold War tensions and crackdowns on communist activities in Singapore. Racial tensions also ran high. To counter the twin threats of communism and communalism, the PAP government established the People's Association (PA) on 1 July, 1960. Community Centres (CCs), which had earlier been established by the British colonial authorities to function as social clubs for residents, immediately came under the control of the PA. Other grassroots organisations were organised from the mid-1960s onwards. In March 1965, the PA set up the first Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) and, by the end of 1966, every electoral constituency had a CCC. The aims of the CCCs were: to promote good citizenship; disseminate information and relay public feedback on government policies and actions; direct and carry out projects and activities at the constituency and national level; and make recommendations on the provision of amenities and facilities in the constituency.³ In 1978, the government established Residents' Committees (RCs) that served residents within a fixed geographical area in order to foster a sense of community spirit. These RCs were also

³ 'Citizens' Consultative Committees are formed – March 1965', *HistorySG*, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/2c4ba986-641c-4e1c-bc2e-4d049cb0c2b6> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

managed by the PA. Since the CCCs and the RCs were managed by the PA, both organisations came under the control of the PAP and the party-appointed advisors to these committees. With Singapore having a one-party Parliament from 1968 to 1981, it became the norm to have the serving PAP MP also serve as advisor to the CCC and RC.

The question as to whether advisors to the CCCs and RCs are necessarily the serving MP of the constituency in which they are found arose after J B Jeyaretnam, Secretary-General of the WP, won the Anson by-election in 1981. In the general election that followed in 1984, Jeyaretnam was re-elected in Anson while the Singapore Democratic Party's Chiam See Tong was elected in Potong Pasir. Both Jeyaretnam and Chiam assumed that they would automatically be appointed advisors to these grassroots organisations. However, the Government insisted that grassroots organisations function to serve the state and it was thus the prerogative of the ruling party to appoint their advisors. As such, defeated PAP candidates continued to work as advisors to the CCCs and RCs and this allowed them to maintain contact with voters, potentially conducting an electoral campaign long before the date for the next election was even announced.

Furthermore, the PA refused to allow opposition MPs to use CC facilities within their constituencies. When Jeyaretnam raised the issue of not being able to organise Mathematics and English Language tuition classes and a WP council meeting at Anson CC, Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Defence) Phua Bah Lee responded that "a community centre was government property and that an MP cannot be allowed to do what he liked in these places".⁴ Chiam had his own problems dealing with public servants. Five months after winning Potong Pasir, he wrote three times to the Housing and Development Board (HDB) asking for space for an MP's office but the HDB did not respond. He was forbidden from visiting schools

⁴ 'Jeya to question Government's attitude towards opposition', *The Straits Times*, 5 May 1985, 9.

within his constituency and was told “to wait for a year, to prove himself” when he volunteered to help in the RCs. Adding salt to the wound, a CC in Potong Pasir was converted into an administrative office for the RC secretariat.⁵ While First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reassured Chiam that he would be provided with an MP’s office at nominal rent, he reminded both opposition MPs that “our duty is not to help the opposition”. PAP MP Dr Aline Wong also told both opposition MPs “to grow up and stop crying childishly for special attention”.⁶ In 1999, Chiam criticised the HDB for its refusal to give permission to any changes to buildings or grounds, including “even a single nail”.⁷

Grassroots organisations remained under PAP control. On 1 July, 1985, Jeyaretnam organised an Anson Council of 20 members as “the first constituency-based grassroots body which was not appointed or controlled by the Government”. Jeyaretnam challenged the PAP’s position that the PA and the CCs were apolitical.⁸ In response, the Registry of Societies demanded that the Anson Council register itself as a society since “grassroots organisations, like the residents’ committees, were all registered societies”.⁹ The application for this was submitted in October 1985 but, by September 1986, it had still not been approved.¹⁰ Jeyaretnam lost his parliamentary seat in December 1986 after he was convicted of falsifying his party’s accounts. He was also fined S\$5,000 and jailed for a month. It marked the end of any attempt by the opposition to start its own grassroots organisation. PAP candidates unabashedly admitted that grassroots organisations were designed to give them an edge over opposition candidates. In GE1988, for instance, PAP candidate

5 ‘Chiam cites examples of double standards’, *The Straits Times*, 15 May 1985, 13.

6 ‘Chok Tong replies to Jeya’, *The Straits Times*, 16 May 1985, 1.

7 Diane K Mauzy and RS Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People’s Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), 146.

8 ‘20 form council for Anson’, *The Straits Times*, 1 Jul 1985, 9.

9 ‘Anson Council seeks registration’, *The Straits Times*, 4 Dec 1985, 16.

10 ‘Workers’ Party plans to promote activities’, *Business Times*, 16 Sep 1986, 2.

Kenneth Chen told journalists that he was “counting on” his 10 years of service with the Potong Pasir CCC to unseat Chiam.¹¹

Opposition MPs continued to be shut out of grassroots organisations by the PAP. In 1989, a frustrated Chiam asked why Chen, the PAP candidate he had defeated in GE1988, had been made an advisor to the Management Committee of Potong Pasir CC, and not him, the elected MP. Minister for Community Development Wong Kan Seng deliberately avoided the issue by replying that it was up to Chiam to manage Potong Pasir Town Council “in any way he wished”. Labour Minister Lee Yock Suan argued that the PA would appoint as advisor, anyone “best suited to carry out government policies—PAP MP or otherwise”. Unfortunately, the PAP does not have a record of appointing opposition MPs as advisors to grassroots organisations. Lee went on to say that although Chiam was the elected MP, the latter had no right to enter CCs, schools and other government facilities in his constituency because “the political system in Singapore was not one based on a system of power sharing between or among political parties”.¹² As late as 2011, a PA spokesperson told *TODAY* that, “It is not possible to appoint opposition MPs as advisors because we cannot ask opposition MPs to help the Government to connect better with the people.”¹³

THE OPPOSITION AND TOWN COUNCILS

After Jeyaretnam was elected in 1981, PAP leaders assumed that opposition MPs were incapable of managing their constituencies. Second Deputy Prime Minister S Rajaratnam predicted that, within one year, Anson residents would seek help from neighbouring PAP-

11 ‘PAP man counting on his 10-year grassroots work’, *The Straits Times*, 30 Aug 1988, 12.

12 ‘Chiam asks same question again: Why am I not made an advisor?’, *The Straits Times*, 23 Mar 1989, 15.

13 Wong Pei Ting, ‘Explainer: The perennial issue of public funding for upgrading works in opposition wards’, *TODAY*, 26 Oct 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/explainer-perennial-issue-public-funding-upgrading-works-opposition-wards> (accessed 22 Jul 2020).

held constituencies “because Mr Jeyaretnam would not be able to solve their problems”.¹⁴ While *The Straits Times* reported that a town council concept was mooted by PAP MPs Lim Boon Heng and S Chandra Das in 1984, it was Jeyaretnam who organised a committee of 18 members in Anson to take over the cleaning and routine lift maintenance services from the HDB in April 1985. Jeyaretnam wanted the HDB to pay the committee through a portion of the conservancy charges imposed on residents in Anson. His plan was for this committee to become Anson’s town council.¹⁵ That same month, Minister for National Development Teh Cheang Wan announced in Parliament that Anson would be one of the first constituencies to have its own town council to take over estate management duties from the HDB.¹⁶ He then wrote to offer Jeyaretnam and Chiam the opportunity to organise their own town councils “so that they do not have to complain about the HDB”.¹⁷

In June 1988, Parliament passed the Town Councils Act.¹⁸ The elected MP would chair the council which would be organised within the constituency. This arrangement meant that “voters would have to live with their choices”.¹⁹ Political scientist Chan Heng Chee argued that the introduction of town councils was a “de-bureaucratisation” process meant to “redirect the responsibility of estate management” from the HDB “back to citizens”.²⁰ The MP was expected to demonstrate financial and administrative competence by managing public housing and estates in the constituency in place of the HDB.

A major challenge for opposition-held town councils was the overt control over the disbursement of funds from the government, which

14 ‘PAP will win back Anson, says Lee’, *The Straits Times*, 2 Nov 1981, 1.

15 ‘Jeya forms Anson cleaning committee’, *The Straits Times*, 16 Apr 1985, 1.

16 ‘Anson among the first group’, *Singapore Monitor*, second edition, 19 Apr 1985, 2.

17 ‘Anson to be among first town councils’, *The Straits Times*, 20 Apr 1985, 13.

18 Act 12 of 1988.

19 Mauzy & Milne (n 7), 96.

20 Chan Heng Chee, ‘The PAP and the Structuring of the Political System’ in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. Kernal Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 84.

curtailed the autonomy through which estate upgrading projects could be planned for, financed and managed. Town councils were funded through service and conservancy charges paid by residents, grants from the Ministry of National Development (which oversees the HDB) and through income from investments of existing funds.²¹ During GE2006, the PAP promised that up to S\$80 million would be spent upgrading HDB flats in Potong Pasir SMC, but only if voters rejected Chiam at the polls.²² The PAP's fundamental assumption is that opposition politicians will not be effective managers of the town council due to the lack of administrative and municipal experience. In 2009, the Ministry of National Development initiated an annual Town Council Management Report to assess town councils in four areas: cleanliness of estates, maintenance, lift performance and management of arrears in service and conservancy charges. The first report, which was published in 2010, listed the opposition wards of Hougang and Potong Pasir as having the worst scores. Both Low and Chiam responded by arguing that the report was politically biased.²³ Even after GE2020, the *BBC* reported that, "there are long-standing allegations that PAP-held areas tend to be allocated more funds for the improvement and maintenance of facilities than opposition constituencies, which discourages swing voters".²⁴

Another challenge was that funds for opposition-run town councils were disbursed through grassroots organisations in each constituency.

21 Benjamin Joshua Ong, 'Enforcing Town Councils' Duties of Financial Prudence: Problems Addressed by the Town Councils (Amendment) Act 2017', *Singapore Academy of Law Journal* (2018), 30(2), 924.

22 Daniel Buenas and Oh Boon Ping, 'Govt will approve \$80m upgrading plan if PAP wins: candidate Sitoh', *Business Times*, 5 May 2006, https://www.asiaone.com/specials/ge2006/news/20060505_story8_1.html (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

23 'Milestones and controversies', *The Straits Times*, 12 Feb 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/milestones-controversies> (accessed 22 Jul 2020).

24 'Singapore election: Does the political shake-up change anything?', *BBC News*, 22 Jul 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53471536> (accessed 22 Jul 2020).

In 2014, the CCCs in Aljunied GRC, Punggol East SMC and Hougang SMC drew up 17 upgrading projects to tap into funding support from the Community Improvement Projects Committee (CIPC). These projects included covered walkways, barrier-free access and fitness corners. However, the CIPC funds were disbursed to the town council through the grassroots organisations in these constituencies, and not to the elected MPs. It was thus the grassroots advisor—usually the defeated PAP candidate—who had to apply for the grant as opposition MPs’ applications were simply ignored.²⁵

THE AHTC LITIGATION

In GE2011, the WP team, consisting of Party Chair Sylvia Lim, Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang, Assistant Secretary-General Pritam Singh, Chen Show Mao and Muhamad Faisal bin Abdul Manap, defeated the PAP incumbents in Aljunied GRC. It also retained Hougang SMC, a seat the party held since 1991. On 27 May, 2011, AHTC was organised to manage the estates and public flats of Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC. After a by-election in January 2013, when the WP won Punggol East SMC, the AHTC was reorganised as the Aljunied-Hougang–Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC).

In the inaugural issue of the AHTC newsletter *Good Neighbours* in May 2012, Low noted that taking over the management of the council from the PAP had been “challenging and rewarding” and that the MPs had worked under “great time pressure to get things up and running, resulting in a smooth transition”.²⁶ The previous PAP-managed Aljunied Town Council (ATC) had sold its computer

25 ‘Grassroots groups plan improvement projects for Workers’ Party wards’, *The Straits Times*, 21 Jan 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/grassroots-groups-plan-improvement-projects-for-workers-party-wards> (accessed 3 Aug 2020).

26 *Good Neighbours*, May 2012, <https://www.ahtc.sg/links/2015/10/Newsletter-May2012.pdf> (accessed 9 Jul 2020), 4.

management system to Action Information Management (AIM), a private limited company with a paid-up capital of S\$2.00 and having three former PAP MPS as directors. The new AHTC was thus forced to work quickly to upgrade its system at WP-held Hougang SMC to fit Aljunied GRC.²⁷ Later, it was reported that AIM had bought over the system from ATC in June 2010 for S\$140,000. The system was transferred to AIM in January 2011 and AIM terminated its contract with AHTC in August 2011, just three months after the WP team won their seats and two months before the 12th Parliament was sworn in.

The PAP and WP then clashed over the decision by AHTC to hire FM Solutions and Services (FMSS) to provide estate management services. In a Parliamentary session in May 2013, PAP MPs queried the WP over a possible conflict of interest arising from this appointment since FMSS was owned by WP supporters. Furthermore, the owner of FMSS, Danny Loh, was Deputy Secretary of the town council while his wife, How Weng Fan, was the General Manager of AHPETC. In February 2014, the AGO conducted an independent financial audit of AHPETC's accounts and found several lapses in council governance and compliance of government regulations. The AGO noted that AHPETC's General Manager, Deputy Secretary and two other officers (Chua Zhi Hon and Kenneth Foo) owned stakes in FMSS. In June 2015, Sylvia Lim, Chair of the WP and AHPETC, sent an open letter to residents with the message that "certain financial issues will take time to resolve" and that the council would continue to serve them.²⁸

The AHTC/AHPETC saga "got heated" prior to GE2015.²⁹ In Parliament, Minister for Law and Foreign Affairs K Shanmugam

27 Lydia Lam, 'Workers Party took on a town council which was 'stripped of its computer system': Defence', *CNA*, 8 Oct 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/workers-party-ahtc-prptc-stripped-of-computer-system-10802624> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

28 Lim, 'Political Developments' (n 1), 39.

29 Bilveer Singh, *Is the People's Action Party Here to Stay? Analysing the Resilience of the One-Party Dominant State in Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), 133.

accused Sylvia Lim of being dishonest and quipped that “if this kind of conduct had taken place in a public company, it probably would attract criminal sanctions”.³⁰ In August 2015, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said that the PAP hoped to win Aljunied GRC in the next GE to “sort out the mess that’s in the town council”.³¹ The PAP was “harping on the problem” in order to discredit the WP for lacking competence and integrity.³² Nonetheless, in GE2015, the WP was re-elected, albeit with reduced majorities, in Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC. The PAP also recaptured Punggol East SMC. Political scientist Bilveer Singh believed that the drop in the WP’s percentage of votes in GE2015 could be attributed to the PAP’s relentless attacks on the WP.³³

The electoral loss of Punggol East SMC meant that the AHPETC reverted to being AHTC as Punggol East was now managed by the PAP-run Pasir Ris–Punggol Town Council (PRPTC). In November 2015, the Court of Appeal ordered the AHTC to appoint accountants to fix the lapses that had been found by the AGO earlier in the year in February. A year later, in November 2016, accounting firm KPMG uncovered “improper payments” worth over S\$33.7 million that had been made to FMSS and its subsidiary FMSI. An independent panel appointed to act on behalf of the AHTC in July 2017 and the PRPTC decided to take legal action for “losses allegedly incurred” in September.³⁴ The defendants were the three WP MPs, AHTC councillors Chua Zhi Hon and Kenneth Foo Seck Guan, FMSS, former AHTC Deputy Secretary How and her husband Loh (who had died in an accident overseas). The independent panel was established to act on behalf of AHTC and to avoid a conflict

30 Ibid, 134.

31 ‘PAP wants to win Aljunied, fix ‘mess’, *The Straits Times*, 15 Aug 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/pap-wants-to-win-aljunied-fix-mess> (accessed 3 Aug 2020).

32 Kenneth Paul Tan, ‘Singapore in 2015: Regaining Hegemony’, *Asian Survey* (2016), 56(1), 112.

33 Singh (n 29), 134.

34 Ng Jun Sen, ‘How It All Unfolded: The AHTC Case in a Nutshell’, *TODAY*, 11 Oct 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/how-it-all-unfolded-ahtc-case-nutshell> (accessed 7 Jul 2020).

of interest since it may reasonably be assumed that the incumbent councillors and officers were not about to sue themselves.³⁵

The trial ran from 5 to 30 October, 2018. The defence argued that the defendants owed “no fiduciary duties” to AHTC and PRPTC, and that they had “acted in good faith and in the best interests of the residents”. Lawyers representing the PRPTC counter-argued that the appointment of FMSS was “tainted”. However, the last secretary of the former PAP-managed ATC admitted that having an officer of the managing agent employed as the secretary and general manager of the town council “had been the practice of ATC under the PAP, prior to the handover to WP”.³⁶ AHTC had also hired a higher-priced architect for seven of its 10 construction projects, leading to an increased expenditure of S\$2.8 million. It formed part of several “improper payments” at the centre of the litigation. The defence, however, pointed out that this was also a practice of the ATC under the PAP, so “what is OK for Peter doesn’t seem to be OK for Paul”.³⁷ The defence also noted that the WP had taken over the ATC that was “stripped of its town council management computer system”. The trial was costly for the three WP MPs, who had to crowdsource funds for their legal defence through the In Good Faith blog on 25 October, 2018. By then, according to the three WP MPs, they had spent almost S\$600,000 on the case.³⁸ The WP aimed to raise S\$1 million but that figure was surpassed within three days. The blog announced that S\$1,076,170 had been raised and the appeal was closed.³⁹

35 Ong, ‘Enforcing Town Councils’ Duties’, 943; and Narayanan Ganesan, ‘Singapore in 2017: Structural Changes and Political Challenges’, *Asian Survey* (2018), 58(1), 190.

36 Lydia Lam, ‘Workers’ Party MPs, AHTC town councillors acted in good faith, did not breach duties: Defence’, *CNA*, 5 Oct 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/workers-party-ahtc-town-councillors-acted-in-good-faith-defence-10795004> (accessed 6 Jul 2020).

37 Selina Lum, ‘Engaging higher-priced architect led to AHTC paying \$2.8m more’, *The Straits Times*, 6 Oct 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/engaging-higher-priced-architect-led-to-ahtc-paying-28m-more> (accessed 7 Jul 2020).

38 Ng Huiwen, ‘WP MPs receive \$900,000, up from \$470,000, in public donations to fund AHTC lawsuits’, *The Straits Times*, 26 Oct 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/workers-party-mps-receive-nearly-500000-in-public-donations-to-fund-ahtc-lawsuits> (accessed 7 Jul 2020).

39 ‘Closing the appeal’, 27 Oct 2018, <https://ingoodfaith.blog/2018/10/27/closing-the-appeal/> (accessed 7 Jul 2020).

In April 2019, the lawyers representing the WP MPs said that the sum of S\$33.7 million assessed by KPMG was “speculative” and that only S\$15,710 was recoverable.⁴⁰ The lawyers also criticised KPMG for not conducting on-site investigations and the failure to take into account the practices of the former ATC. In his judgment, Justice Kannan Ramesh found that the decision to replace CPG Facilities Management with FMSS without a tender was based on Low’s distrust of companies deemed to be PAP-affiliated. Low was also criticised for his continued employment of former Hougang Town Council staff who had served the WP for two decades.⁴¹ In October 2019, the Court found the eight defendants liable for some of the claims made against them. On 5 November, Parliament voted 52-9 to have Low and Lim recuse themselves from the AHTC’s financial matters. The three WP MPs filed appeals against the judgment on 11 November.⁴²

The WP went on the offensive after the High Court’s ruling. Pritam Singh accused the PAP of “political double standards” in the approval of projects by town councils. In late 2012, at the request of residents, AHTC planned to build a barrier-free access ramp at Bedok Reservoir Road. However, the ward’s CCC advisor, rather than the elected MP, had to put in the application for funds from the CIPC. The PA handed over the complete ramp to the AHTC seven years later in October 2019. Singh also criticised the appointment of defeated PAP candidates as advisors to grassroots organisations in opposition-held constituencies.⁴³ Chua Eng

40 Ng Jun Sen, ‘How It All Unfolded: The AHTC Case in a Nutshell’, *TODAY*, 11 Oct 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/how-it-all-unfolded-ahtc-case-nutshell> (accessed 7 Jul 2020).

41 Tham Yuen-C, ‘AHTC case: WP leaders Low Thia Khiang, Sylvia Lim engineered plan to ensure FMSS could be appointed without tender, says High Court’, *The Straits Times*, 12 Oct 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/wp-leaders-low-lim-engineered-plan-high-court> (accessed 5 Nov 2019).

42 The appeal was heard by the Court of Appeal on 25 February 2021. The judges have reserved their judgment, which is the current status as this book goes to press.

43 Navene Elangovan, “Double standards” in how People’s Association and grassroots groups operate in opposition wards: Pritam Singh’, *TODAY*, 17 Oct 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/double-standards-how-peoples-association-and-grassroots-groups-operate-opposition-wards> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

Leong, the grassroots advisor for Eunus (part of Aljunied GRC), who had lost to the WP in GE2015, replied that both Eunus CCC and AHTC proposed the building of the ramp, and that the PA “would ensure the seamless completion of the project once the necessary approvals have been granted”.⁴⁴ The PAP’s control of grassroots organisations remains a constant source of frustration for opposition MPs. A study of how CIPC funds were disbursed found that all 15 PAP-run town councils received S\$67 million in 2017 and 2018, but the AHTC did not receive a single cent.⁴⁵

THE GE2020 CAMPAIGN

The WP went through a leadership renewal after GE2015. In November 2017, Low Thia Kiang announced at the party’s 60th anniversary celebrations that he would be stepping down from his role as Secretary-General.⁴⁶ Pritam Singh succeeded him in 2018. More importantly for the WP was Low’s decision in June 2020 not to contest GE2020. He felt his work was done and said in an interview, “I have always maintained that a party cannot depend on just an individual or a few individuals”.⁴⁷ Later that month, the government announced that Nomination Day for GE2020 would be held on 30 June, with Polling Day on 10 July. Surprisingly, the judgment on the three WP legislators did not feature as a major issue during the election campaign. Prior to the dissolution of Parliament, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave a televised address to the nation that

44 ‘PA grassroots advisor hits back at WP chief Pritam Singh’s allegation of ‘double standards’, *TODAY*, 19 Oct 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/pap-grassroots-advisor-hits-back-wp-chiefs-allegation-double-standards> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

45 Daryl Choo, ‘CIPC funds: Which town council got how much’, *Class Notes*, 4 Nov 2019, <https://www.ourclassnotes.com/post/cipc-funds-which-town-council-got-how-much> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

46 Danson Cheong, ‘Low Thia Kiang will step down as WP Secretary-General Next Year’, *The Straits Times*, 3 Nov 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/low-thia-kiang-will-step-down-as-wp-secretary-general-next-year> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

47 Tham Yuen-C, ‘I felt my work was done’: Former WP chief Low Thia Kiang who will not stand in GE2020’, <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/i-felt-my-work-was-done-former-wp-chief-low-thia-kiang-who-will-not-stand-ge2020> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

focused on Covid-19, the economy and jobs.⁴⁸ The PAP's strategy was to focus on immediate and personal concerns of voters and not on the accountability and management of town councils. There was no major attempt by the PAP at character assassination by making use of the High Court's decision to smear the WP.

As part of the election campaign, the AHTC ran a special 32-page edition of *Good Neighbours*. In it, the town council informed residents that they had ended the term with an accumulated surplus of about S\$7.9m and that the majority of this surplus would be "locked up in your Sinking Fund for future town improvement works".⁴⁹ In its online message to voters on the party's website, Secretary-General Pritam Singh reminded them of the challenges the WP had faced in setting up AHTC, starting with "the challenge of AIM—the \$2-PAP company—that pulled out the town council's computer system after the WP took over the Aljunied Town Council". The WP looked beyond the AHTC saga with its message that the party "offers Singaporeans a choice, and an alternative voice in Parliament".⁵⁰

The Straits Times had anticipated that Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC would be key electoral contests in GE2020 since both constituencies form the AHTC.⁵¹ The PAP team, consisting of Victor Lye, Shamsul Kamar, Chua Eng Leong, Alex Yeo and Chan Hui Yuh, focused their campaign on residents' needs. Not surprisingly, they were active members of the grassroots organisations in the constituency.⁵² Alex Yeo was the grassroots

48 'Singapore GE: Full text of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's address to the nation on June 23', *The Straits Times*, 23 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-full-text-of-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-address-to-the-nation-on-june> (accessed 17 Jul 2020).

49 *Good Neighbours*, Special Edition, 2, <https://www.ahtc.sg/links/2020/06/Special-Newsletter-2020-PDF-for-website.pdf> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

50 'Make Your Vote Count', <https://www.wp.sg/message-for-voters/> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

51 Low Lin Phoong, 'Singapore GE2020: Key election battles in East and West Coast, Aljunied, and Sengkang GRCs', *The Straits Times*, 30 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-key-election-battles-in-east-and-west-coast-aljunied-and-sengkang-grcs> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

52 Grace Ho, 'Singapore GE2020: PAP Aljunied team says focus remains on residents' needs despite tough fight expected', *The Straits Times*, 30 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-pap-aljunied-team-says-focus-remains-on-residents-needs-despite-tough> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

advisor for the Paya Lebar ward in the GRC and he told reporters, “(You can) see our track record over the past nine years—even when we couldn’t find any government funds to tap, and even when we don’t run a town council”.⁵³

In a televised broadcast, Pritam Singh said that Singapore’s political system should have “a strong opposition presence”.⁵⁴ When Prime Minister Lee declared in an online rally that investors would be worried if Singaporeans voted in more opposition MPs—a familiar scare tactic by the PAP that has been used frequently in the past—the WP responded with the counter-argument that “Singapore did not collapse when PAP lost ministers in 2011”.⁵⁵ Two days before Polling Day, *The Straits Times* reported that the “stakes are high” for the WP at Aljunied GRC.⁵⁶ During the campaign, the WP emphasised the “healthy financial status” of AHTC. The town council had a surplus of S\$7.9 million which, according to Pritam Singh, was more than double the amount it had when the WP took over ATC after GE2011.⁵⁷

There are two reasons why the suit turned out to be a non-issue in GE2020. First, instead of focusing on town council management and the PAP’s control of grassroots organisations, the WP chose to push

53 Grace Ho, ‘Singapore GE2020: Aljunied not owned by one party, issues bigger than fight between PAP and WP, says PAP team in Aljunied GRC’, *The Straits Times*, 1 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/aljunied-not-owned-by-one-party-issues-bigger-than-fight-between-pap-and-wp-pap-team-in> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

54 Grace Ho, ‘Singapore GE2020: WP says vote will chart S’pore’s political system; PAP says it can do more for Aljunied residents’, *The Straits Times*, 3 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-wp-says-vote-will-chart-singapores-political-system-pap-says-it-can-do> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

55 Rei Kurohi, ‘Singapore GE2020: Singapore did not collapse when PAP lost ministers in 2011, say WP candidates’, *The Straits Times*, 7 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/spore-did-not-collapse-when-pap-lost-ministers-in-2011-wp-candidates> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

56 Grace Ho and Tham Yuen-C, ‘Singapore GE2020: Stakes are high for Workers’ Party in Aljunied GRC’, *The Straits Times*, 8 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/aljunied-grc-still-on-a-knife-edge> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

57 ‘AHTC in “healthy” financial status, raked in over twice the accumulated surplus recorded in 2011: WP chief Pritam Singh’, *The Online Citizen*, 7 Jul 2020, <https://www.onlinecitizenasia.com/2020/07/07/ahtc-in-healthy-financial-status-raked-in-over-twice-the-accumulated-surplus-recorded-in-2011-wp-chief-pritam-singh/> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

the message that Parliament needed more opposition MPs. Pritam Singh regarded the appointment of defeated PAP candidates, and not the elected opposition MP, as advisors to grassroots organisations as a stumbling block to political change in Singapore. The PAP wanted to recapture Aljunied GRC so that the fourth generation (4G) leaders would come out politically stronger after GE2020. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong questioned the WP's integrity, describing its call for more opposition a "seductive lie" and echoed the old party mantra that checks and balances should come from within the PAP.⁵⁸ However, when Nomination Day came, it was clear to voters that the PAP's Aljunied team did not include candidates of ministerial calibre, leading some commentators to call it a "suicide squad", especially when going up against a beefed-up WP team.⁵⁹ Some residents in Aljunied GRC felt that because there was no minister (or potential minister) in the PAP team, the party had abandoned the constituency.⁶⁰

Second, the Ministry of National Development reported in its annual Town Council Management Report that the AHTC had done very well in lift performance, management of arrears in service and conservancy charges and corporate governance, and marginally well in estate cleanliness and maintenance. The Ministry of National Development argued that the AHTC had performed well in corporate governance because KPMG had audited the council with funds from the HDB for the auditing work.⁶¹ On 9 June, 2020, about two weeks before Parliament was dissolved, the

58 Grace Ho, 'Singapore GE2020: Fierce fight expected in Aljunied, Singapore's only opposition-held GRC', *The Straits Times*, 28 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/fierce-fight-expected-in-sporesonly-opposition-held-grc> (accessed 30 Jun 2020).

59 Low Lin Fhoong, 'Singapore GE2020: Key election battles in East and West Coast, Aljunied and Sengkang GRCS', *The Straits Times*, 30 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-key-election-battles-in-east-and-west-coast-aljunied-and-sengkang-grcs> (accessed 9 Jul 2020).

60 Tham Yuen-C, Audrey Tan and Li Xueying, 'GE2020 results: Pritam Singh leads Workers Party to victory in Aljunied GRC with higher margin than in 2015', *The Straits Times*, 11 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pritam-singh-leads-wp-to-victory-in-aljunied-grc-with-higher-margin-than-in-2015-according> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

61 Tham Yuen-C and Linette Lai, 'All town councils including AHTC submitted clean financial statements; MND asks why Sylvia Lim, Low Thia Khiang remain involved in financial matters', *The Straits Times*, 5 Dec 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/all-town-councils-including-ahtc-submitted-clean-financial-statements-mnd-asks-why-sylvia> (accessed 12 Dec 2019).

AHTC announced that about 180 lifts in HDB flats would be upgraded with better safety features in the next 15 months.⁶² Three days later, AHTC announced that to help small businesses cope with the economic impact from the Covid-19 pandemic, there would be a 25% service and conservancy charge rebate for shops and market stalls from June to August 2020.⁶³ The signal was clear—the suit was politically motivated and, despite this distraction, the AHTC had done well in serving its residents.

CONCLUSION

In the early hours of 11 July, 2020, the Elections Department announced that the WP had not only managed to retain Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC but also captured the new Sengkang GRC. The WP won 59.95% of the vote in Aljunied GRC, gaining an increase of 8.99% in the process. In Hougang SMC, the WP retained its seat with 61.21% of the vote, an increase of 3.55% from GE2015. The WP also won 52.12% of the vote in Sengkang GRC.⁶⁴ The WP strategy of “successfully walking the line between a call for change and not rocking the sampan that is Singapore” had been a successful one.⁶⁵ It remains to be seen what will happen next with the AHTC issue. There is still the possibility that if Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh fail in their appeal and are unable to pay what is owed to the AHTC, they may well be declared bankrupt and forced to resign from Parliament.

62 Michelle Ng, ‘180 lifts under AHTC to be upgraded over 15 months’, *The Straits Times*, 10 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/180-lifts-under-ahtc-to-be-upgraded-over-15-months> (accessed 7 Jul 2020).

63 Rei Kurohi, ‘25% S&CC rebate for shops, stalls under Aljunied-Hougang Town Council’, *The Straits Times*, 13 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/25-scc-rebate-for-shops-stalls-under-aljunied-hougang-town-council> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

64 For GE2015 and GE2020 results, see https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary2015.html and <https://www.eld.gov.sg/finalresults2020.html> (accessed 6 Aug 2020).

65 Tham Yuen-C, ‘GE2020: WP’s message of constructive politics wins over voters’, *The Straits Times*, 11 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/wps-message-of-constructive-politics-wins-over-voters> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

An analysis of the results in *The Straits Times* showed that the WP's increased vote share in Aljunied GRC was evidence that the AHTC suit was not a major issue for voters on Polling Day.⁶⁶ A survey of more than 1,500 voters that was conducted during the campaign but released after the official announcement of the results found that 47% of respondents agreed with the opposition appeal for diverse voices in government.⁶⁷ Voters' rejection of the PAP in Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC does not translate into their being unconcerned about accountability and governance in AHTC. The PAP almost recaptured Aljunied GRC in GE2015. In GE2020, however, the PAP wisely decided that it would not bode well for the party to use the suit to question the WP's credibility. The swing back towards the WP can be seen as a confirmation that voters would like the PAP to move on from the case.

GE2020 showed that PAP candidates were rejected because voters wanted credible WP candidates, including the defendants in the AHTC litigation case, to represent them in Parliament. The successful defence of the Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC, along with the victory at Sengkang GRC, shows that voters are open to opposition politics and disdained the "gutter politics" reminiscent of the Lee Kuan Yew era.⁶⁸ Recognising voters' expectations of an effective opposition, Prime Minister Lee made a surprise announcement on the night of the election—that Pritam Singh would be appointed Leader of the Opposition, the first person to hold such an appointment in Singapore's parliamentary history.

66 Tham Yuen-C, Audrey Tan and Li Xueying, 'GE2020 results: Pritam Singh leads Workers' Party to victory in Aljunied GRC with higher margin than in 2015', *The Straits Times*, 11 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pritam-singh-leads-wp-to-victory-in-aljunied-grc-with-higher-margin-than-in-2015-according> (accessed 15 Jul 2020).

67 Ng Jun Sen and Daryl Choo, 'The Big Read: What went wrong for the People's Action Party, in the eyes of party insiders', *TODAY*, 18 Jul 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/big-read/big-read-what-went-wrong-peoples-action-party-eyes-party-insiders> (accessed 14 Aug 2020).

68 Dhevarajan Devadas, 'Younger Voters: Warming more than the cockles of their hearts beyond GE2020', IPS Commons, 21 Jul 2020, <https://ipscommons.sg/younger-voters-warming-more-than-the-cockles-of-their-hearts-beyond-ge2020/> (accessed 14 Aug 2020).



A banner of Dennis Tan in Hougang SMC.



Celebrations in front of Blk 322, Hougang Ave 5 on election night.