

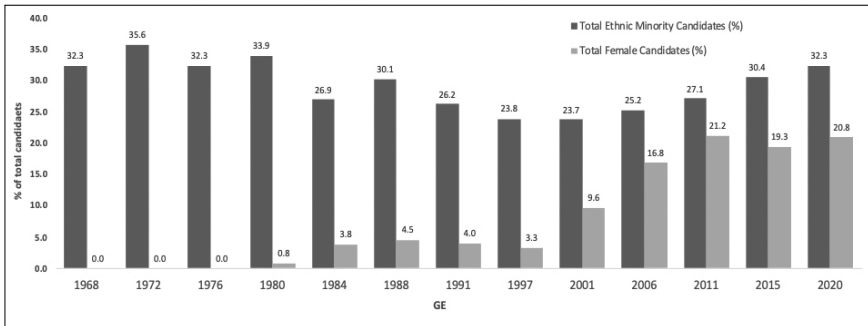
ETHNICITY, GENDER AND THE VOTE IN SINGAPORE

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This chapter examines the rise in the political representation of ethnic minorities and women, and issues on race and religion that dominated electoral platforms in the 2020 general elections. Inter-party competition was keen despite the strict campaign conditions.² For the first time, the electoral campaign was fought on the mainstream and social media. Candidates canvassed for votes under the new Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) and Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA). Despite the pandemic restrictions, a high of 192 candidates from 11 parties competed for 93 seats in Parliament. Significantly, there was a rise in the number of ethnic minority and women candidates from all parties since the last general election. As Figure 1 shows, the total minority candidates rose from 30.4% to 32.3% while the overall female candidates also edged up from 19.3% to 20.8% since GE2015. In fact, the total number of ethnic minority candidates is now close to the trend seen in the 1970s more competitive elections. For example in GE1972, more than 35% ethnic minority candidates competed in Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) based on simple plurality electoral system.

¹ I am grateful to Elaina Nguyen for her diligent research assistantship.

² The Elections Department of Singapore (ELD) did not offer alternative voting options such as early voting or to mail-in for those sick or quarantined. There was also ban on physical rallies and no assembly of more than five people for walkabouts.

Figure 1: Total Ethnic Minority and Female Candidates (%), 1968-2020 GE

Source: Compiled based on data from Elections Department of Singapore (Elections Department Singapore 2020)

Aside from the increase in minority and female candidates, two women broke new ground by leading teams in Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), a task typically reserved for heavyweight male candidates or cabinet ministers. This time, the People's Action Party (PAP) team, led by a female cabinet minister Josephine Teo won in a four-member Jalan Besar GRC while the young, four-member team from the Worker's Party (WP), led by female lawyer He Ting Ru also defeated the PAP's all-men team in Sengkang GRC.

Parties also departed from risk-averse candidate selection strategies during this election. For example, the PAP broke tradition by nominating two women from the military, Gan Siow Huang, a former army Brigadier-General,³ and Poh Li San, a former helicopter pilot with the Republic of Singapore Air Force.⁴ Gan was the PAP's second political rookie fielded in a single member seat since 1988.⁵ It was

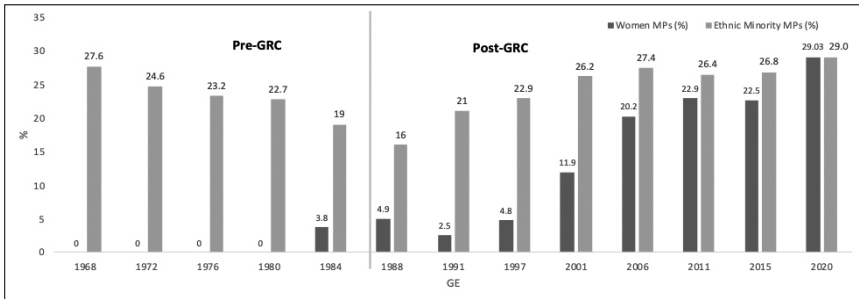
3 Gan Siow Huang received the SAF Merit Scholarship, an award previously only awarded to men. She became the first female brigadier-general in Singapore in 2015 and resigned from her position as Chief of Staff in March 2020. See Kok Yufeng, 'Singapore GE2020: PAP's Marymount Candidate and Spore's First Woman General Gan Siow Huang Goes from Protecting Country to Serving Its Citizens', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/first-woman-general-ex-colonel-face-off-from-protecting-country-to-serving-its-citizens> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

4 Yuen Sin, 'Singapore GE2020: Two New Faces in Ong Ye Kung's PAP Sembawang Team', *The Straits Times*, Jun 29 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/two-new-faces-in-ong-ye-kungs-pap-sem-bawang-team> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

5 Cheryl Chan was the first female political rookie fielded in the Fengshan SMC in the 2015 GE.

impressive that opposition parties such as the WP and the new Progress Singapore Party (PSP) were able to attract young, professional ethnic minority candidates across the island. Overall, the increase in minority candidacy representation led to the highest number of 29% ethnic minorities and women elected in Singapore's history (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Elected Ethnic Minority and Female MPs (%), (1968-2020)



Source: Compiled based on data from Elections Department of Singapore (Elections Department Singapore 2020)

What explains the rise in the political representation of ethnic minority and female candidates? What are the key ethno-religious and gender issues that dominated the platforms? This chapter argues that a combination of institutional and contagion effects motivated tweaks in candidate selection strategies which boosted the numerical representation of minorities, especially the Malays, in the House. The rising demands of the younger and more progressive electorate, coupled with the use of the digital media under pandemic conditions facilitated more robust discussions on issues of race and religion.⁶ Post-election, GE2020 also engendered debates on the role of women and gender equality.

⁶ Public opinion polls show that the younger voters are a diverse, internet-savvy group who are more sympathetic toward opposition parties and more concerned with equality and social justice. See Imelda Saad, 'Younger Singaporeans More Likely to Back Opposition', *CNA*, 4 Oct 2011, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/cna_younger-singaporeans-more-likely-to-back-opposition_041011.pdf (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

WHY WAS THERE A RISE IN ETHNIC AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN GE2020?

To understand the rise in the numerical representation of women and ethnic minorities in Singapore, we need to consider the changes in the electoral system after 1988 and the impact that manipulation of constituency sizes had on political parties and voting behaviour.⁷ Figure 1 shows that despite having an average of 23.4% of minority legislative presence from 1968 to 1984, the PAP government pushed for the GRC scheme or a party ethnic quota to mandate parties to field at least one ethnic minority candidate in each multi-member constituency to guarantee the presence of ethnic minorities in Parliament.⁸ In contrast, no gender quota was introduced despite the fact that women made up only 3.8% of the House after the 1984 general elections.

The GRC scheme transformed Singapore's electoral system from one that comprised purely SMCs to a mix of single and multi-member districts based on plurality party block vote rule. Essentially, the ethnic quota achieved its intended aim of altering candidate selection methods and guaranteeing the minimum level of quota minorities. Studies also show that it affected where ethnic minorities competed and had the unintended effect of boosting women's overall political participation and representation over time.⁹

A body of literature has explained how the GRC scheme asserts a range of mechanical and psychological effects on parties and voters.¹⁰

7 Netina Tan and Bernard Grofman, 'Electoral Rules and Manufacturing Legislative Supermajority: Evidence from Singapore', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* (2018), 56(3), 273–297.

8 Netina Tan, 'Why Are Gender Reforms Adopted in Singapore? Party Pragmatism and Electoral Incentives', *Pacific Affairs* (2016), 89(2), 369–393.

9 See Netina Tan, 'Ethnic Quotas and Unintended Effects on Women's Political Representation in Singapore', *International Political Science Review* (2014), 35(1), 27–40, and *ibid.*

10 See Netina Tan, 'Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore', *Electoral Studies* (2013), 32(4), 632–643; Tan & Grofman (n 7); Hussin Mutalib, 'Constitutional-Electoral Reforms and Politics in Singapore', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (2002), 27(4), 659–672; and Joel Fetzer, 'Election Strategy and Ethnic Politics in Singapore', *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* (2008), 4(1), 135–153.

As Kevin Tan's chapter in this book¹¹ and my previous work have demonstrated, the frequent gerrymandering and changes in district magnitudes of the GRCs have the combined effects of magnifying the ruling party's legislative supermajority and the intended effects of ethnic quota.¹² I build on this extant scholarship to show how institutional effects and strategic party decisions explain why more women and ethnic minorities have been fielded in the recent elections.

Bigger GRCs, More Minorities

First, the frequent gerrymandering and changes in district sizes provide more opportunities, especially for the resource-rich PAP to field more than one ethnic minority candidate in the GRCs.¹³ The 13 GRCs initially created in 1988 guaranteed at least 16% of ethnic minority Members of Parliament (MPs). By GE2020, this was raised to 18.3% with 17 GRCs. See Table 1 on the following page.

The GRC scheme thus succeeded in reshaping candidate selection strategies. The enlargement of GRCs incentivises parties to field more than one ethnic minority candidate, going beyond the mandated quota level in the GRC. As Table 1 shows, the total number and magnitudes of GRCs have grown overtime. By GE2020, the total number of GRC and SMCs were set at 17 and 14, respectively. There were a total of 11 five-member GRCs, while the large six-member GRCs were eliminated. As usual, no specific reason was given as to why some new SMCs were created or why certain GRCs were eliminated or changed. With 11 five-member GRCs in GE2020, the

11 See Chapter 3 of this volume.

12 See, Tan & Grofman (n 7); 'Defending the Legitimacy of Singapore Elections: Maruah Position Paper on Electoral Boundary Delimitation Q3 2014', <http://maruah.org/2014/10/10/defending-the-legitimacy-of-singapore-elections-part-3-electoral-boundaries-and-cdcs/> (accessed 1 Nov 2020); and Netina Tan, 'Institutionalized Hegemonic Party Rule in Singapore' in *Party Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies and the Shadows of the Past*, ed. Allen Hicken & Erik Kuhonta (New York: Cambridge University Press 2014), 49–73.

13 For more on how inexperienced candidates ride on the coat-tails of heavy weight politicians to get elected in the GRC, see Netina Tan, 'Institutionalized Hegemonic Party Rule in Singapore', *ibid.*

Table 1: GRC Magnitudes and Ethnic Minority Representation, 1988-2020

GE	Total Seats	Total GRCs	GRC Magnitudes	Guaranteed Ethnic Minority Representation (%)	Total Elected Ethnic Minority Representatives	Ethnic Minority Legislative Representation (%)
1988	81	13	13 x 3-MP GRCs	16	13	16
1991	81	15	15 x 4-MP GRCs	18.5	17	21
1997	83	15	5 x 4-MP GRCs	18.1	19	22.9
2001	84	14	6 x 5-MP GRCs, 6 x 5-MP GRCs, 4 x 6-MP GRCs	16.7	22	26.2
2006	84	14	9 x 5-MP GRCs, 5 x 6-MP GRCs	16.7	23	27.4
2011	87	15	2 x 4-MP GRCs, 11 x 5-MP GRCs, 2 x 6-MP GRCs	17.2	24	27.6
2015	89	16	6 X 4-MP GRCs, 8 X 5-MP GRCs, 2 X 6-MP GRCs	18	24	27
2020	93	17	11 x 5-MP GRCs, 6 x 4-MP GRCs	18.3	27	29

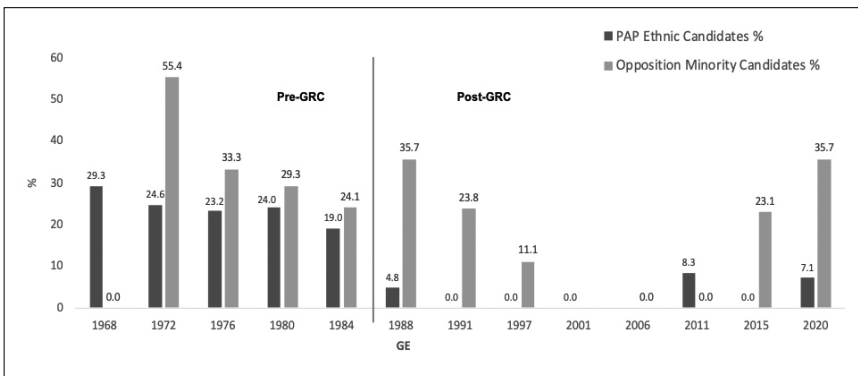
Source: Compiled based on data from Elections Department of Singapore (Elections Department Singapore 2020)

PAP fielded two or more ethnic minorities in seven GRCs—Ang Mo Kio, Holland–Bukit Timah, Jurong, Nee Soon, Pasir Ris–Punggol, Sembawang and Tanjong Pagar. Similarly, the WP also fielded three ethnic minority candidates in Aljunied while the new PSP fielded four ethnic minority candidates in their five-man team in Nee Soon GRC. Clearly, fielding more ethnic minority candidates than the allocated quota in one GRC ends up raising the overall elected number of ethnic minorities.

The Contagion Effect

The placement of more ethnic minorities in GRCs does not signify the PAP's commitment to diversity or equity. In fact, since introducing the GRC scheme, the PAP has not fielded ethnic minority candidates in the more competitive SMC seats from 1991 to 2006 (Figure 3). Typically, the more competitive SMCs were reserved for Chinese or Indian male candidates, with no Malay representation to date. The PAP only bucked this trend in GE2011, when a Eurasian PAP candidate, Michael Palmer, was placed in the newly created Punggol East SMC.

Figure 3: Ethnic Minority Candidates in Single Member Constituencies (%), 1968-2020



Source: Compiled based on data from Elections Department of Singapore (Elections Department Singapore 2020)

The PAP's practices show that despite having the GRC scheme to guarantee ethnic legislative presence, its candidate placement practices are not rooted in the idea of diversity. The PAP's discriminatory candidate placement practice stands in contrast with the opposition parties, which have fielded ethnic minority candidates in SMCs even after the GRC scheme was introduced, especially from 1988 to 1997 (see Figure 3). It is evident that the PAP did not see its ethnic

minority candidates, especially Malays, as competitive or able to win in a one-on-one fight in an SMC. For example, the PAP did not field any Malay candidates in SMCs from 1991 till GE2020. Also, despite the token increase in the total number of Malay candidates fielded in GRCs, the total number of other ethnic minorities such as Indians or Eurasians has remained stagnant.

In contrast, the opposition parties such as the WP, PSP and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) have attracted more ethnic minorities to join their ranks in recent years. As an example, while the WP was once perceived as a traditional, working-class focused party for older Chinese men, its 2020 slate of candidates was in fact more diverse than the previous years, with five female and seven ethnic minority candidates in its slate of 21 candidates. The WP's slate of candidates continued a trend started in 2011 of including more professionals, most of them in their 30s and 40s.¹⁴

A breakdown of ethnic minority candidates who ran in the last three general elections shows that, on the whole, opposition parties have done a better job boosting diversity and fielding more minority candidates. As can be seen in Table 2, the opposition parties collectively attracted more Indian and Malay candidates to contest than the PAP from 2011 to 2020. In fact, the PAP only began to increase its number of Malay candidates (15.1%) in GE2020, primarily to keep up with the opposition (17.2%).

In GE2020, the PAP played up the 'diversity' of its candidates and its efforts to nominate more Malay candidates.¹⁵ The PAP's recent attempt to attract more Malay candidates is an attempt to

¹⁴ Tham Yuen-C, 'Singapore GE2020: Consolidation Rather Than Growth for Opposition Parties', *The Straits Times*, 30 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/opposition-consolidation-rather-than-growth-for-parties> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

¹⁵ Lim Yan Liang, 'PAP Slate for GE2020 Most Diverse Yet, Will Represent Wide Range of Singaporeans' Views in Parliament: PM Lee', *The Straits Times*, 27 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pap-slate-for-ge2020-most-diverse-yet-will-represent-wide-range-of-singaporeans-views-in> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

Table 2: Breakdown of PAP and Opposition Ethnic Minority Candidates, 2011-2020

PAP Candidates									
	Chinese		Malay		Indian		Others		PAP Total
2011	64	73.6%	12	14%	9	10.3%	2	2.3%	87
2015	65	73.0%	13	14.6%	9	10.1%	2	2.2%	89
2020	68	73.1%	14	15.1%	9	9.7%	2	2.2%	93

Opposition Candidates									
	Chinese		Malay		Indian		Others		Opp Total
2011	57	69%	12	15%	13	16.0%	1	1.2%	83
2015	61	66.3%	16	17.4%	13	14.1%	2	2.2%	92
2020	62	62.6%	17	17.2%	17	17.2%	3	3.0%	99

stem the decline of its Malay support.¹⁶ The mainstream media's disproportionate features on the background and achievements of select Malay candidates appear to be driven by the contagion effect—the pressure to attract younger and progressive electorate to signal progressiveness and inclusivity. In particular, the mainstream media helped to feature how the PAP was successful in attracting young Malay professional 'role models' such as Nadia Ahmad Samdin, Sharael Taha, Mohd Fahmi Ali and Mariam Jaafar and Wan Rizal Wan Zakariah.¹⁷ The emphasis on the professional background and careers of the Malay candidates, whether as a pilot or lawyer, are efforts to account for the government's track record in improving the livelihoods and welfare of the Malay community.

¹⁶ The vote shares of the PAP minority candidates were declining, from a high of 83% in 1968 to a low of 66% by 1988. In particular, the PAP Malay candidates were losing support as they were viewed as the government mouthpieces rather than representatives of their communities.

¹⁷ Hariz Baharudin, 'Singapore GE2020: PAP Malay Candidates Are Role Models, Says PM Lee', *The Straits Times*, 29 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-pap-malay-candidates-are-role-models-says-pm-lee> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

DOUBLE BARREL STRATEGY AND IMPACT ON WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Women were absent in Singapore's Parliament for 16 years from 1968 to 1980. Yet, the PAP has consistently rejected any affirmative action on the basis that gender blindness promotes meritocracy.¹⁸ Since 2009, however, the PAP has tacitly set an informal soft quota of 30% for women candidates. As the PAP's Women's Wing Chairwoman said, "We can aim for a 30% share, or around 25 MPs in today's terms."¹⁹ And despite the lack of a formal gender quota at the legislative level, the PAP has gradually increased the number of women candidates since 2001, contributing to the statistics as presented in Figure 1.

The rise in women's descriptive representation is a result of institutional effects and strategic calculations based on party pragmatism.²⁰ Primarily, the GRC scheme has had a positive spillover effect on women's representation in Parliament. Parties are also incentivised to fulfill the GRC ethnic quota by fielding ethnic minority female candidates as a double barrel strategy to demonstrate their commitment to promoting ethnic and gender equality at the same time. As previously explained, the constant changes in the district magnitude and number of the GRCs incentivise parties to include not only more ethnic minorities but also ethnic minority women.²¹ For example in GE2015, a total

18 The PAP's first female minister, Lim Hwee Hua said: "Gender quotas can be self-defeating and detract from the true basis of merit." See 'No Double Standard, Says Lim Hwee Hua', *The Straits Times*, 18 Jun 2009, <http://singapurakini0906.blogspot.ca/2009/06/no-double-standard-says-lim-hwee-hua.html> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

19 Kor Kian Beng, 'PM Lee Honours PAP Women's Wing Veterans', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2009, <http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20090706-153096.html> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

20 Netina Tan, 'Ethnic Quotas and Unintended Effects on Women's Political Representation in Singapore' (n 9); and Netina Tan, 'Party Quotas and Rising Women Politicians in Singapore', *Politics & Gender* (2015), 11(1), 196–207.

21 Tan and Grofman, 2018; and Netina Tan, 'Pre-Electoral Malpractice, Gerrymandering and Its Effects on Singapore's 2015 GE', in *Change in Voting: Singapore's 2015 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), 168–190.

of eight ethnic minority female candidates competed in seven GRCs. In GE2020, this number rose to 10 ethnic minority female candidates contesting in seven GRCs. In fact, Tanjong Pagar GRC even had two minority females on one party slate (Table 3).

Table 3: Ethnic Minority Female Candidates in GRCs, 2020 GE

Name	Party	Constituency	Race
Nadia Ahmad Samdin	PAP	Ang Mo Kio (5-member GRC)	Malay
Noraini Yunus	RP	Ang Mo Kio (5-member GRC)	Malay
Rahayu Mahzam	PAP	Jurong (5-member GRC)	Malay
Liyana Dhamirah	RDU	Jurong (5-member GRC)	Malay
Kala Manickam	PSP	Nee Soon (5-member GRC)	Indian
Vigneswari Ramachandran	PV	Pasir Ris–Punggol (5-member GRC)	Indian
Mariam Jaafar	PAP	Sembawang (5-member GRC)	Malay
Raeesah Khan	WP	Sengkang (4-member GRC)	Malay
Indranee Rajah	PAP	Tanjong Pagar (5-member GRC)	Indian/Chinese
Joan Pereira	PAP	Tanjong Pagar (5-member GRC)	Eurasian

Source: compiled based on sources from Singapore Elections website.

(PAP = People's Action Party; RP = Reform Party; RDU = Red Dot United; PSP = Progress Singapore Party; PV = Peoples Voice; WP = Worker's Party)

VOTES FOR WOMEN IN GE2020

Big Wins in SMCs

Women performed well in GE2020, boosting the descriptive representation from a mere 3.8% in 1984 to an unprecedented high of 29%. In particular, women stood out in the SMCs. A total of 29 candidates contested in 14 SMCs in GE2020; of these, eight (27.5%) were women. The PAP fielded five women in SMCs, one more than GE2015, including one rookie candidate, Gan Siow Huang, in Marymount SMC. All five PAP female candidates

won in their respective SMCs. In fact, a former controversial PAP female candidate, Tin Pei Ling, who received online flak for her perceived immaturity back in GE2011, won the largest victory margin, receiving 71.14% of the vote in MacPherson SMC against the experienced opposition People's Power Party leader Goh Meng Seng.²² Opposition party PSP also fielded two new candidates, Kayla Low and Gigene Wong, in Yio Chu Kang and Hong Kah North SMCs respectively. The nomination of more women in the SMC contests shows that parties are now less concerned about their electability; SMCs are no longer viewed as a purely male terrain.

Poor Performances by All-Male GRCs

GE2020 was the first time in Singapore's electoral history that a woman led a GRC team, with PAP minister Josephine Teo leading the PAP team and winning the popular vote in Jalan Besar GRC, over the all-male Peoples Voice (PV) team. The success of a female-led GRC team over an all-male team is more significant given the PAP had not performed well in this GRC in GE2015, winning just 67% of the popular vote.

It is also interesting that all-male teams lost all GRC contests when competing against mixed-gender teams in GE2020. All-male teams were slated in Sengkang (PAP), Pasir Ris–Punggol (SDP); Bishan–Toa Payoh (PAP and Singapore People's Party);²³ Chua Chu Kang (PSP); Jalan Besar (PV); Marine Parade (PAP and WP); Marsiling–Yew Tee (SDP); Sembawang (National Solidarity Party [NSP]) and Tampines (NSP). Notably, the all-male PAP team in Sengkang lost to the WP's mixed team that had fielded two female candidates—He

22 Tan Hsueh Yun, 'GE2020: PAP Women Candidates Hold Their Own in Single Seats', *The Straits Times*, 11 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pap-women-candidates-hold-their-own-in-single-seats> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

23 In Bishan–Toa Payoh GRC, the all-male PAP team beat the all-male Singapore People's Party team (67.2% vs 32.7%).

Ting Ru and Reesah Khan.²⁴ Given this experience, it is perhaps a good idea for parties to avoid fielding all-male GRC teams in future.

Female Military Candidates

The PAP often grooms and fields senior male military officials in elections. But in this general election, the PAP broke tradition by introducing two females from the military: Gan Siow Huang, former Brigadier-General in the Singapore Armed Forces, and Poh Li San, a former search and rescue helicopter pilot with the Republic of Singapore Air Force.²⁵ Despite being a political rookie, Gan Siow Huang garnered 55.04% of the popular vote and defeated the PSP's contender, former military colonel Ang Yong Guan. Gan won even though she was a complete political novice and lacked political savviness, attracting many memes that made fun of her tough, militant persona. Her victory shows that Singaporeans vote along party lines rather than on ethnic or gender lines.

DIGITAL CAMPAIGN AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES

The 2020 pandemic election introduced multilingual debates on live national television for all contesting parties. Candidates were invited to speak on TV in all four national languages, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. However, while candidates fielded by the PAP and the WP excelled in the one-hour English TV debate, their counterparts struggled with the challenge of debating in their mother tongues. The live TV debates not only exposed the weakness

²⁴ The young WP team appealed to the young residents of Sengkang and also garnered public support after the great debate performance of Jamus Lim. See Karunaratne Aravinda and Uvindu Bandara, 'Female Power Gives WP an Edge in Sengkang GRC', *The Straits Times*, 14 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/female-power-gives-wp-an-edge-in-sengkang-grc> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

²⁵ Yuen Sin, 'Singapore GE2020: Two New Faces in Ong Ye Kung's PAP Sembawang Team', *The Straits Times*, 29 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/two-new-faces-in-ong-ye-kungs-pap-sem-bawang-team> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

of each party's base support but also Singapore's bilingual policy. For example, the WP, a mass-based party formerly led by Teochew leader Low Thia Kiang failed to send a representative to debate in Mandarin as "the proficiency required to participate in a live debate is of a higher order".²⁶ Reform Party (RP) candidate Charles Yeo's struggle with Mandarin and a PAP Malay candidate Wan Rizal Wan Zakariah's mistakes while speaking in Malay were made into memes and attracted criticism. While the PAP played to its strengths in having Minister S Iswaran speak in Tamil and address issues specific to the community,²⁷ others like the WP, SDP, NSP and RP failed to send any Tamil speaking representatives to the broadcasts due to a lack of Tamil-speaking candidates.²⁸

In addition, three other controversies involving race and ethnicity dominated media headlines during the campaign: (1) the online salvos between the PAP and WP leaders over playwright Alfian Sa'at's loyalties to Singapore; (2) the timing and handling of police reports pertaining to Raeesah Khan; and (3) claims over Singaporeans' readiness for an ethnic minority prime minister.

The Alfian Sa'at controversy was one of the first negative campaigns that politicised race and patriotism. After a national budget debate in June 2020, a PAP MP launched an early attack on the WP's new leader, Pritam Singh, for characterising Singapore playwright Alfian Sa'at as a "loving critic".²⁹ While Singh did not specify who the

26 Kenneth Cheng, 'GE2020: Workers' Party Leaders Apologise for Absence from Mandarin Live TV Debate', *TODAY*, 1 Jul 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ge2020-workers-party-leaders-apologise-absence-mandarin-live-tv-debate> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

27 Yuen Sin, 'Singapore GE2020: Tamil-Speaking Minister Sent to Broadcast as Sign of Respect, Says Shanmugam', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/tamil-speaking-minister-sent-to-broadcast-as-sign-of-respect-shanmugam> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

28 Grace Ho, 'Singapore GE2020: Race – New Views and Conversations on an Age-Old Societal Divide', *The Straits Times*, 19 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/race-new-views-and-conversations-on-an-age-old-societal-divide> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

29 During a debate on the Fortitude Budget, Singh said Singapore is fortunate to have "loving critics amongst us, some of whom have been questioned in this very House in this term of government." See Calvin Yang, 'PAP's Tan Wu Meng Chides WP Chief Pritam Singh for Supporting Poet and Playwright Alfian Sa'at', *The Straits Times*, 19 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/paps-tan-wu-meng-chides-wp-chief-pritam-singh-for-supporting-poet-and-playwright-alfian> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

playwright was, PAP's MP Tan Wu Meng criticised Singh's support of Alfian Sa'at and his loyalty to Singapore on the PAP website a day prior to the announcement of GE2020.³⁰ The online exchange sparked frenzied chatter on what it means to be patriotic and the relevance of *bumiputera* policies or affirmative action to create preferential opportunities for indigenous peoples and Malays. Under pressure, the WP defended its foreign policy position and dismissed the PAP's attempt to conflate Alfian Sa'at views with the WP as "dirty politics" meant to "divide Singaporeans into those who are for or against—not Singapore—but the PAP, and to paint the WP in negative light".³¹

The second salvo against the WP involved two police reports made against WP's young new female Malay candidate, Raeesah Khan, who posted two online comments alleging the government's discrimination of ethnic minorities in Singapore.³² The politicisation of the police reports made against Khan³³ ignited discussions on the politicisation and freedom of expression on issues regarding race, religion and migrant workers in Singapore. The timing and target of the police reports were suspect given that Khan was one of the WP candidates for the hotly contested Sengkang GRC.

30 Ibid. Tan wrote, "This man grew up in Singapore. Singapore gave him his education and he earns a living here (...) And he constantly runs down Singapore, and says he would love to become a Malaysian, and that there is nothing wrong in accepting the *bumiputera* policies here. And takes Malaysia's side when there are tensions between Malaysia and Singapore."

31 Pritam Singh, 'Response to TWM Article', Facebook, 21 Jun 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/pritam.eunos/posts/3226700714018886> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

32 Khan's first post was made on 17 May 2017 about foreigners' violation of social distancing rules during the circuit breaker at Robertson Quay. Her post alleged that the police treated minorities and migrant workers more harshly than foreign expatriates who are "rich Chinese or white people". The second post was made in 2018 regarding the City Harvest Church corruption ruling. She said that Singapore imprisoned minorities and harassed leaders of mosques but set free "corrupt church leaders who stole \$50 million". See Rei Kurohi, 'Singapore GE2020: WP's Raeesah Khan Apologises for Posts Which Allegedly Promoted Enmity Between Different Groups', *The Straits Times*, 5 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-wps-raeesah-khan-apologises-for-posts-which-allegedly-promoted-enmity> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

33 Raeesah's father, Farid Khan, is the president of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI) and a former presidential candidate in 2017. See Tan Tam Mei, 'Singapore GE2020: Netizen Who Claimed to Have Flagged WP's Raeesah Khan's Social Media Posts Is under Probe', *The Straits Times*, 8 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/netizen-who-claimed-to-have-flagged-the-issue-is-under-probe> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

The WP turned the publicity crisis to their advantage. Khan showed remorse and apologised for her “insensitive comments” in an impromptu press conference.³⁴ WP leader Pritam Singh’s support for Khan and his ability to control the narrative, citing Khan’s youth and being “upfront and authentic to the public” were well received.³⁵ Despite the negative publicity, support for Khan and the WP grew. Over 6,000 people formed a Facebook group ‘We Stand Behind Raeesah!’ while an online petition to ‘Let Raeesah Khan campaign in peace. Conduct any investigations after the elections’ garnered 19,000 signatures.³⁶ Politicians from other parties such as PSP’s Tan Cheng Bock also weighed in and dismissed the police reports as “gutter politics”.³⁷

Finally, the PAP’s claim that Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister also dominated social media and newspaper headlines. A police report was made against Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat for his comments, made at a university student forum in 2019, that older Singaporeans are not ready for an ethnic minority prime minister. This was made worse by the citizenry’s widespread discomfort with the reservation of the 2017 Singapore presidential elections for Malay candidates. Additionally, voters appeared unconvinced why the widely popular DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam, a politician of Indian ethnicity was not a top choice to succeed PM Lee Hsien Loong.³⁸ Despite the fervent online discussions that Heng’s comments sparked, the police report was dismissed on the grounds that Heng’s statement was

34 Kurohi (n 32).

35 Ibid.

36 Clement Yong and Jean Iau, ‘Singapore GE2020: Signs of Young Voters’ Crucial Role in Election Outcome’, *The Straits Times*, 16 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/signs-of-young-voters-crucial-role-in-ge2020-outcome> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

37 Danson Cheong, ‘Singapore GE2020: Tan Cheng Bock Calls Controversy over the Postings ‘Gutter Politics’, *The Straits Times*, 8 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/tan-cheng-bock-calls-controversy-over-the-postings-gutter-politics> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

38 Wong Pei-Ting, ‘Older Generation of Singaporeans Not Ready for Non-Chinese PM: Heng Swee Keat’, *TODAY*, 28 Mar 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/older-generation-singaporeans-not-ready-non-chinese-pm-heng-swee-keat> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

not intended to “wound anyone’s racial feelings or promote enmity between different races”.³⁹

IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON DIVERSITY IN SINGAPORE

Three key facts stood out with regard to ethnicity, gender and voting behaviour in GE2020. First, ethnic minorities proved electable and competitive in elections. The GRC scheme has worked to raise the legislative presence of ethnic minorities over the years. Indeed, the 29% of elected minority MPs is much higher than the mandated quota level of 18.3%, far exceeding Singapore’s total national ethnic minority population of 24%. This trend supports past work arguing that ethnic minority candidates are competitive and that voters are not motivated by racial or gender voting behaviour.⁴⁰ In fact, the high level of 29% ethnic minorities in the House raises the question of whether the GRC scheme is still necessary to moderate ethnic voting behaviour.

Second, it is clear from the voting trend, especially in the SMCs, that party alignment matters more than ethnicity or gender. The argument that Singaporeans are not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister thus ought to be abandoned. In fact, more frank and nuanced discussion about why and how race and religion matter should be encouraged, especially given the rise of right-wing populism and xenophobic violence around the world. The government’s mishandling and backlash from the Raeesah Khan controversy

39 Heng claimed that based on his interactions with voters in previous elections, older generations tended to not be supportive of a non-Chinese PM. See Tan Tam Mei and Rei Kurohi, ‘Singapore GE2020: Police Reports Made Against DPM Heng for Remarks on Non-Chinese PM; AGC Says No Offence Committed’, *The Straits Times*, 7 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-police-reports-made-against-dpm-heng-for-non-chinese-pm-remarks-agc-says> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

40 In 1981, the PAP lost a seat in a 1981 by-election to an opposition Worker’s Party leader, J B Jeyaretnam, a lawyer of Sri Lankan heritage. In the 1984 elections, nine minority candidates from the Workers’ Party and Malay-based Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura won over 35% votes. See Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP In Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), 210 and 215.

shows that the young voters are unlikely to tolerate unsubstantiated claims or censorship on issues of race and religion. In fact, a report found that, “young voters and observers believe the PAP’s targeting of Ms Raeesah, 26, who has been an activist for the rights of the marginalised since she was 17, backfired on the party for its perceived high-handedness.”⁴¹ In particular, the PAP’s demands for the WP to state its stance on Khan’s posts were negatively perceived as “political mudslinging” and undermined the public’s trust for blowing Khan’s comments “out of proportion”.⁴² These incidents show that the incumbent, rather than voters, need more sensitivity training to avoid politicising race and religion for partisan gain.

Post-election, PM Lee Hsien Loong and Minister K Shanmugam have called for serious discussions with youths about race and religion.⁴³ Shanmugam noted:

But it’s also clear that the younger generation takes a different approach. And I think we need to find a way in which those aspirations and viewpoints can be dealt with, because the younger generation of Singaporeans are going to be in charge of Singapore, and their views on how these things ought to be discussed need to get a substantial degree of attention too.⁴⁴

This acknowledgement shows that the PAP realises the need to rethink their approach and appeal to younger voters as they no longer hold a monopoly over ideas on social issues in the digital age.

Third, women did well in GE2020. More women came forward from both the PAP and opposition parties than in any previous

41 See Yong & Iau (n 36).

42 Ibid.

43 Yuen Sin, Hariz Baharudin and Irshath Mohamed, ‘Singapore GE2020: PAP Candidates Round up Campaign in Mandarin, Malay and Tamil Talk Shows’, *The Straits Times*, 9 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pap-candidates-round-up-campaign-for-ge2020-in-mandarin-malay-and-tamil-talk-shows> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

44 Olivia Ho, ‘Singapore GE2020: Shanmugam Gives Take on Race Relations, PAP Loss in Sengkang’, *The Straits Times*, 12 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/shanmugam-gives-take-on-race-relations-pap-loss-in-sengkang> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

general election and there are now more Chinese and ethnic minority women in the House. It is noteworthy that both the PAP and the WP have placed issues such as gender wage gap, gender inequality in household chores and retirement assistance for older women on their agenda.⁴⁵ There was more careful policing of sexist content during digital campaign. For example, the PAP's use of spousal abuse analogy to attack opposition SDP's Chee Soon Juan was criticised by the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).⁴⁶ This suggests that the rise in political representation of women may have had some substantive impact. Another indication of progress was the Government's call for a White Paper on a range of women's issues to promote greater gender quality in Singapore by 2021.⁴⁷

This general election has seen a more diverse and bigger slate of candidates. Overall, the descriptive representation of both ethnic minorities and women has improved. Whether the elected minority and women MPs will substantially improve the welfare and interests of those whom they symbolically or descriptively represent remains unstudied. That said, legislative diversity also ought to include other traditionally excluded groups such as the trade unionists, disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks, as seen in Taiwan's legislative Yuan. Whether the PAP and other parties are willing to promote legislative diversity beyond ethnicity and gender in Singapore is yet to be seen.

45 For example, the WP online panel outlined their manifestos would help to address women's issues. One recommendation the WP has proposed is requiring that employers with 10 or more employees report gendered differences in pay for the same positions to Manpower Ministry (A. Tan 2020).

46 AWARE rejected the PAP's invocation of domestic violence for a political spat, especially for reinforcing the myth of false allegations of abuse and especially the rise in domestic violence during Covid-19 (Tang 2020).

47 Zhaki Abdullah, 'Singapore to Embark on a Review of Women's Issues in Move Towards Greater Gender Equality, Leading to White Paper Next Year', *CNA*, 20 Sep 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/gender-equality-womens-issues-singapore-to-embark-engagements--13126778> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).



Raeesah Khan with Louis Chua and Sylvia Lim.



Jose Raymond looking for support in Potong Pasir.