

Singapore in 2022

Resolving Political Succession amid Growing Geopolitical Uncertainties

ABSTRACT

As in 2021, Singapore in 2022 remained largely in crisis mode despite resolving the keystone issue of political succession, with a prime-minister-in-waiting clearly in place. Still, COVID-19, together with the continued US–China economic and political conflicts, the negative fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the anticipation of a possible recession in 2023, continued to cast dark clouds over Singapore and its politico-economic future. These developments were somewhat counterbalanced by positive developments in regional diplomacy, which acted as possible shock absorbers of negative fallout from outside the region. Still, Singapore appears to be at a crossroads, with political changes at home being challenged by external developments, and with the shape of things to come in Singapore remaining largely unknown.

KEYWORDS: PAP, succession crisis, Workers' Party, ASEAN, great power relations

In many ways, Singapore in 2022 was a continuation of Singapore in 2021. In *Asian Survey's* previous year-end review (Singh 2022, 153–60), the key themes discussed were the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising economic challenges and decline, and uncertainty around the politics of baton-passing from prime minister Lee Hsien Loong to his successor. At the same time, there were geopolitical uncertainties around the intensifying

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US–China political and security challenges, especially competition for pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as concern over developments in Singapore’s Southeast Asian neighborhood.

RESOLVING POLITICAL SUCCESSION IN SINGAPORE

Compared to his two predecessors, Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong’s key shortcoming has been his inability to resolve the issue of political succession. Since becoming prime minister in 2004, he has publicly upheld that this was a high-priority issue. However, as 2022 ends, he has yet to hand over the reins of power, despite an earlier promise to do so on turning 70, in February 2022. Worse still, his anointed successor, Heng Swee Keat, stepped down in April 2021—that is, the prime-minister-in-waiting stepped down instead of the prime minister. This threw a wrench into the whole issue of succession—something political elites, especially those in the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), had argued was the lynchpin in Singapore’s success story.

In April 2022, Prime Minister Lee announced that a new leader of the PAP’s fourth generation (4G), Lawrence Wong, had emerged, putting him in line to be Lee’s political successor.¹ Lawrence, who made his political debut in the 2011 general election, was named as the deputy prime minister in June. Lawrence, born in December 1972, is 11 years younger than Heng, who was born in April 1961. Heng cited the short “runway” as his key reason for stepping down as leader of the 4G; Lawrence seems young enough to last for two good terms (perhaps ten years) after he takes over the country’s leadership in the next year or so.

Who is Lawrence? He has been a civil servant in various ministries, and Prime Minister Lee’s principal private secretary from 2005 to 2008. Yet, in the PAP’s hierarchy, his rise is quite recent. In the PAP’s 2012 Central Executive Committee (CEC, the party’s highest decision-making body), new entrants into national politics such as Chan Chun Sing, Heng Swee Keat, and Tan Chuan Jin were co-opted, but not Lawrence.² And he was only co-opted, not elected, in the 2018 CEC. He was elected in the party’s 2020 and 2022

1. The first generation was led by Lee Kuan Yew, the founding prime minister; the second, by the next prime minister, Goh Chok Tong; and the third, by the incumbent, Lee Hsien Loong.

2. “Co-opted” means that they did not qualify through voting but were brought into the CEC by the elected committee.

elections. Lawrence is junior to other members of the PAP's 4G such as Heng Swee Keat, Chan Chun Sing, Tan Chuan Jin, and Ong Ye Kung. Hence, the big question is, how will he fare against strong party leaders, especially when his stalwart supporters, such as Lee Hsien Loong, Teo Chee Hean, and K. Shanmugam, are no longer around? If the 4G leaders do not rally and support him, he will have trouble helming the party, possibly setting the stage for an internal split.

Boosting the odds in favor of Lawrence, Prime Minister Lee, who is also the secretary-general of the party, placed Lawrence and his key supporters in an unchallengeable position in the party following the election of the 37th CEC in November 2022. On November 26, the PAP announced that along with Lee Hsien Loong as the secretary-general, Lawrence would be the deputy secretary-general, a new party position, with two of his close supporters, Chan Chun Sing and Desmond Lee, as assistant secretaries-general, and that this was “in line with plans for the party leadership transition” (*Today* 2022).

To the credit of Prime Minister Lee and the 4G leaders, since Heng's stepping down, the PAP has managed to put forth an heir apparent, signaling that the ruling party's succession politics has been settled after a tenuous start. The big question is Lawrence's ability to act as a glue for other 4G leaders and craft a united front in the party; to gain the PAP cadres' and the public's support; to win the next general election; and to become Singapore's public face internationally, signaling that all is well, especially to the foreign investors on whom Singapore depends for its prosperity. Another big question is when Lawrence will become prime minister—for example, will it be before or after the next general election, which must be held before November 23, 2025?

DOMESTIC POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Domestically, in 2022, there were several policies that stood out. First was the decision on Article 377a of the penal code. In his National Day address in August 2022, Prime Minister Lee announced that the government would repeal the colonial-era law banning gay sex. In a largely conservative society, the matter had prompted intense debate: conservatives, mainly from religious communities, insisted on retaining the ban, while the increasingly active LGBT community and other progressive citizens called for its repeal. Lee argued that the repeal was consistent with society's greater acceptance of gays and would bring Singapore's law “into line with current social mores.”

While the government believed that this was “the right thing to do” (Lee 2022a), it was part of a balancing act that could not please everyone in the LGBT community. This was because in tandem with the repeal, the government decided to legally protect the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman. Enshrining this definition in the constitution would make it difficult to challenge in a court of law, and by extension to legalize gay marriage, which dismayed the LGBT community (Koh and Mathews, 24 August 2022). But on November 29, 2022, the Singapore Parliament said yes to both measures, decriminalizing gay sex (with a vote of 93 to 3) and shielding the definition of marriage from legal challenge (Lim 2022).

Another major development was the Court of Appeal’s decision in the *Aljunied-Hougang Town Council* case, which had been pending for nine years. The issue of mismanagement of the town council’s finances surfaced following the capture by the opposition Workers’ Party, in the 2011 general election, of the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency and Hougang’s single seat. In 2019, the High Court found the party’s leaders in breach of various duties in their handling of about SD 33 million (USD 24.5 million) of the town council’s funds, mainly involving appointment of town council managers without a tender.

In November 2022, the Court of Appeal exonerated the party leaders concerning the appointment of managers without an open tender. The court ruled that the leaders had acted in good faith in carrying out their duties and did not owe the town council fiduciary or equitable duties, despite still being liable for negligence in certain payment aspects. Thus they are now unlikely to lose their parliamentary seats on grounds of bankruptcy, so this is a major legal and political victory for Singapore’s leading opposition party.

In December 2022, Christopher de Souza, a PAP MP and deputy speaker, was found guilty by a disciplinary tribunal of the Singapore Law Society of colluding with a client in suppressing potentially incriminatory evidence. De Souza has challenged the verdict, and the PAP has taken no action against him pending the outcome of the appeal. The verdict strengthens Singapore’s reputation of letting no one be above the law, even an important member of the ruling party.

The general global and regional geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties directly hit Singapore’s economy. The economic slowdown continued in 2022, and it is expected to persist in 2023. Economic growth in 2022 was far below 2021’s growth of 7.6%. The Ministry of Trade and Industry

expected the republic's economy to grow only by 0.5–2.5% in 2022, with a possible technical recession in the first half of 2023. The slowdown is attributed to weakening global demand, fears of recession in Europe and the US, and sluggish economic growth in China—worsened by the Ukraine War, along with worsening tensions among the major powers, which have dampened business and consumer confidence (*Straits Times* 2022).

RISING GEOPOLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND THREATS

A consistent theme of Singapore's international environment was the increasingly dangerous geopolitical conflicts, with their attendant economic uncertainty, as well as climate change. In a video message to the UN General Assembly High-Level Forum of Small States, Prime Minister Lee (2022b) referenced the troubled and dangerous external environment, referring to (among other things) the continuing US-China conflict in the political and economic domains, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its challenge to rules-based order, rising commodity prices, and disruption of supply chains, which was worsening poverty, plus insecurity arising from climate change and cyber threats. These are immense challenges to small states such as Singapore, he said.

The continuous “cold war” between the US and China over the last five to six years has been disconcerting for most states, especially smaller ones in the Indo-Pacific region. Singapore's key challenge is trying to stay relevant internationally without taking sides between the US and China. Singapore is strategically close to the US, as shown by the bilateral Free Trade Agreement that came into force in January 2004 and the Framework of Security Agreement, signed in July 2005, which includes the provision of military facilities. On the other hand, Singapore is much closer to China ethnically and economically, partly due to geographical and cultural proximity.

But the main event that pushed Singapore to “choose sides” did not directly involve the US or China; it was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. When Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in February and March of 2014, Singapore condemned the act as an unprovoked invasion in breach of international law. Similarly, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Singapore condemned it as a military aggression against a sovereign state, violating the UN Charter and international law. Prime Minister Lee argued that rather than taking sides in the conflict, Singapore's stance was determined

by the need to stand up for the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty of states, especially of smaller ones in the face of great powers. Similarly, the minister of education, Chan Chun Sing, said, “We believe that the rule of law, especially on the international front, is the best guarantee for the survival of a small country” (quoted in Tan 2022).

Singapore’s objection to the Russian action included a number of active measures, including co-sponsoring a draft resolution in the UN Security Council to condemn the invasion; co-sponsoring a resolution on the situation of human rights in Ukraine; and announcing sanctions on items that can be used by Russia’s war efforts in Ukraine, as well as blocking certain Russian banks and financial transactions. In June 2022, the Singapore government also sent a humanitarian-assistance package to Ukraine. In return, Russia included Singapore on a list of countries that had committed “unfriendly actions.”

Nevertheless, there were some positive geopolitical developments for Singapore. A spate of regional meetings, some of them ASEAN-centered, reaffirmed Singapore’s belief in creating and enshrining overlapping regional mechanisms in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific as vital catalysts for peace and stability. Cambodia hosted the ASEAN and East Asia Summits, Thailand hosted APEC, and Indonesia hosted the G20 meeting. Regional and US–China tensions eased slightly following the meeting of Joe Biden and Xi Jinping in Cambodia in November. Myanmar’s military junta was not invited to the ASEAN Defense Ministers Retreat, expressing ASEAN’s displeasure with the lack of political progress by the military in the country.

In June, Singapore hosted the Shangri-La Dialogue, which brought together defense representatives from 42 countries. The security summit, held after a hiatus of two years due to COVID-19, reaffirmed Singapore’s diplomatic role internationally and marked the first face-to-face meeting of the US defense secretary and the Chinese defense minister. Further emphasizing the importance of defense, Singapore resumed in-person foreign military exercises, such as Exercise Trident in Australia and Exercise Tiger Balm in Hawaii, and participated for the first time in Exercise Super Garuda Shield in Indonesia, which involved 13 countries including the US.

While there remain some Southeast Asian states that are close to the US or China, a general consensus seems to be emerging in the region that by itself China’s political, economic, and military rise is not as worrisome a threat as the worsening US–China competition and attempts by Washington and Beijing to force regional states to take sides. ASEAN states such as Singapore have

declared themselves neutral in the US–China conflict, largely due to the region’s close ties with both sides. Similarly, with rising tensions in the South China Sea, both the US and China have courted one of the claimant states, the Philippines, forcing Manila to strike a delicate balance between the two great powers. However, with the US realizing that it cannot compel ASEAN to take its side, Washington has indicated its readiness to go outside Southeast Asia to counter China’s rising power in the Indo-Pacific through the Quad (the US, Japan, Australia, and India) and AUKUS (the US, UK and Australia). This has somewhat distanced the Southeast Asian states from the US and made them even more determined to side with neither the US nor China.

Southeast Asia also witnessed two changes in administrations, in the Philippines and Malaysia. In the background of these elections was the grim situation in Myanmar. The military junta remained in power following its February 2021 overthrow of the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi, who had won the election of November 2020 by a landslide. The forcible change of administration and ongoing instability have disconcerted ASEAN member-states. Contrastingly, in May 2022, former senator Bongbong Marcos and former Davao City mayor Sara Duterte won the presidential and vice-presidential elections in the Philippines with a clear majority. Both are children of former presidents of the Philippines: the late Ferdinand Marcos and Rodrigo Duterte, respectively.

The interdependence of Singapore and Malaysia made the 15th general election in Malaysia, of November 2022, vitally important for Singapore. The fragmentation of the Malaysian political system, which has persisted since the 2018 general election, fueled an uncertain political situation, with a hung parliament as the final electoral outcome. The key political winners were the Coalition of Hope, with 36% of the parliamentary seats, and the National Coalition, with 33%. Through the intervention of the Agong (roughly, the king) of Malaysia, a national unity government was proposed under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, who heads the Coalition of Hope. The leading component of the coalition was the Democratic Action Party, which is pro-China and ideologically opposed to Malay and Islamic supremacy in the country.

Potentially troubling for the future of Malaysian politics is the resurgence of political Islam and pro-Islamic political forces under the National Coalition, in which PAS (the Malaysian Islamic Party) and BERSATU (an increasingly nationalist-secular party championing Malay rights) captured 43 and 30 parliamentary seats, respectively. While the emergence of the Coalition of

Hope may be comforting for the largely Chinese-majority Singapore, continued instability and uncertainty can be expected in the near future, especially if pro-Malay and pro-Islamic politics surges in Malaysia as part of the National Coalition's efforts to undermine Anwar and the Coalition of Hope.

CONCLUSION

The problem of political succession has eased, but the world around Singapore and beyond does not look amicable. Just as the outcome of the 2022 general election in Malaysia is unlikely to resolve the polarization in Malaysian politics, the continuing geopolitical tensions will continue to darken Singapore's political, military, and economic security and outlook. Singapore was at a crossroads and facing strong headwinds as 2023 approached.

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