

Lion City Lessons

Singapore voters made nervous by global and regional instability opt for the status quo in a big way, but government knows it will have to keep delivering the goods.

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Bangkok Post, 14 September 2015

National pride, populist measures, opposition party weaknesses, and a "flight to safety" mindset at a time of regional economic and political vulnerability all galvanised Singaporeans to vote for the status quo in last Friday's election.

The tone for the campaign was set earlier this year during the emotional outpourings following the death of founding father Lee Kuan Yew. In the recent 50th anniversary celebrations there was also genuine enthusiasm and gratitude to the People's Action Party (PAP) for its achievement in transforming a swampy backwater into a leading world economy.

Freebies given to citizens during the golden jubilee certainly helped, but so too did the PAP's adoption of a softer tone, acknowledging that its previous arrogant and non-communicative style of management had alienated some voters, analysts said.

The result was an increase in the PAP's popular vote -- to nearly 70% from 60.1% in the 2011 election -- that surprised most commentators. That translated into 83 seats in an election where all 89 seats were being contested for the first time. The party's seat total was its best since 1991, and compared with 81 out of 87 seats won in 2011.

The strength of the fresh mandate would have made his late father proud, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told cheering supporters after the results were announced.

While there may have been a desire among Singaporeans for more checks and balances in the Singapore system, academics said voters saw retaining one-party dominance as a priority as part of a flight to safety.

"They see threats of terrorism in Thailand and political turbulence in Malaysia. Malaysia just celebrated its independence with the Bersih protests against the government," said Eugene Tan Kheng Boon, an associate professor of law at Singapore Management University.

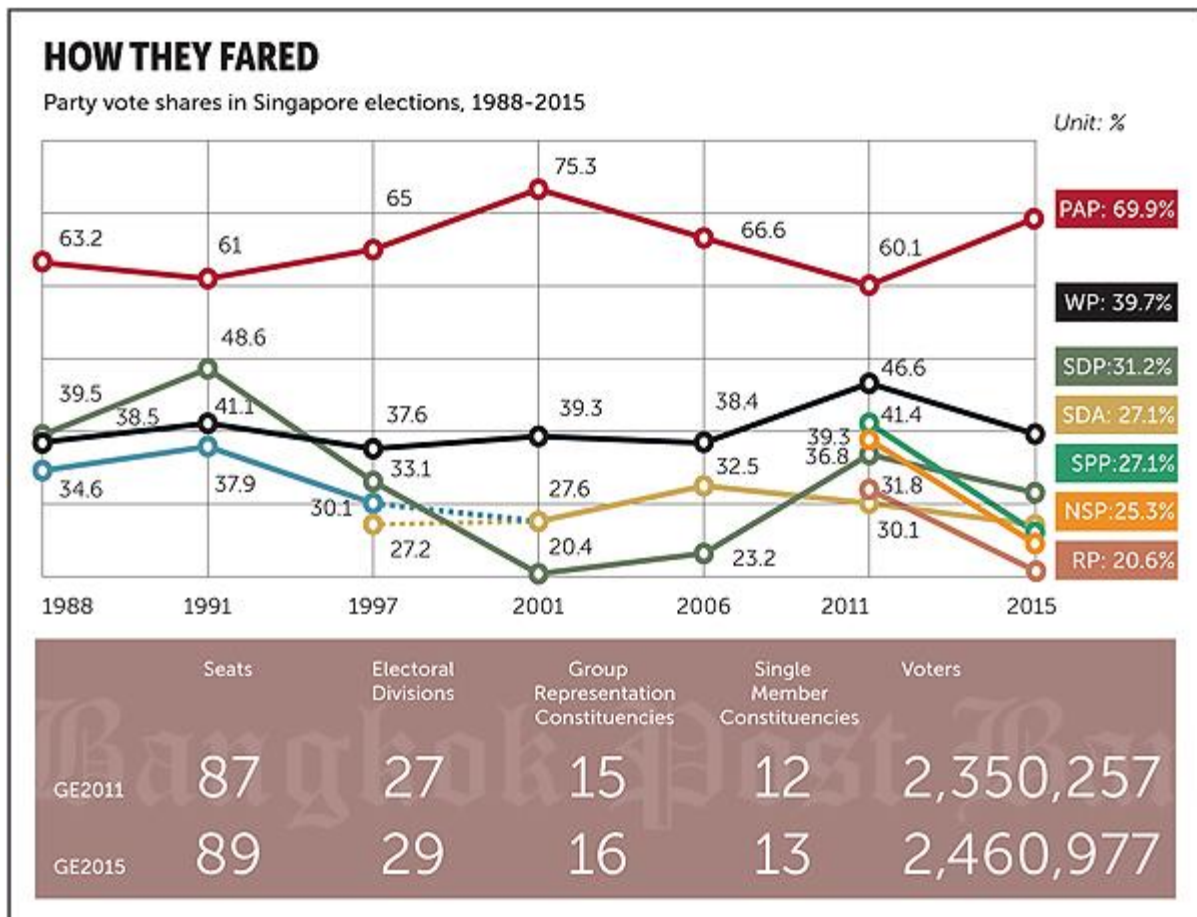
Concerns about national and regional insecurity have converged in the mindset of the voters, and the thick haze drifting from Indonesian fires on voting day underscored how vulnerable the tiny island was, hence a strong government was needed, said Mr Tan.

The adjustment made by the ruling party was also a significant factor. The PAP has been working hard since the previous election in May 2011 when it lost six seats to the opposition and saw its vote total fall to a record low.

"There were enough hot-button issues, such as the cost of living, public transport inadequacies, healthcare affordability, retirement inadequacy and immigration, [to cause the government to] pull out all the stops to address these issues," said the scholar.

While many saw the results as a surprise -- the opposition lost one constituency and struggled to maintain two others -- Kevin Hewison, a professor of politics and international studies at Murdoch University, said the outcome was predictable.

"After all, the PAP has won every election since independence, and no one predicted any change. Indeed, the election was called with a very short campaign time, designed to limit opposition exposure in the media," said Mr Hewison, also director of the Asia Research Centre.



Note: Vote % is the percentage of total votes achievable in the constituencies contested by candidates, not the percentage of the nationwide total.

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"What is interesting is the percentage of the vote, that the ruling party has increased nearly 10 percentage points. At the same time the Workers' Party retained its seats. So the result is the status quo," he said.

Singapore's middle class, he said, had demonstrated that it prefers the stability of a strong government and the predictability of an authoritarian regime.

Opposition parties, from the top echelon to rank-and-file volunteers, were saddened by the big swing in the popular vote to the ruling party.

"It's very surprising, considering that there has been a groundswell against the PAP over these last few years, as Singaporeans have lost their trust in the government's management of their retirement funds (Central Provident Fund) and on the overpopulation issue," said

outspoken blogger Roy Ngerng Yi Ling, who ran for the Reform Party in the prime minister's Ang Mo Kio constituency.

Mr Ngerng acknowledged that the government had made incremental changes such as increasing interest rates for older people to help with their retirement, adding that other policies for niche groups might have contributed to the vote swing.

But he maintained that Singaporeans continue to be concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability in the management of retirement funds, and on the lack of job and wage protection policies for workers.

"I hope that the new government will continue to look into these issues seriously and address these issues for Singaporeans, and to also continue to work with the other political parties and Singaporeans to achieve improvements in these areas," he said.

The reduced opposition voice in parliament was also a concern as there would be fewer checks and balances.

"I hope that a more confident government, driven by its stronger mandate, will engage with the larger populace to work toward a more united Singapore, and also for Singaporeans to realise their ability to make change by speaking up and contributing to a more effective government," said Mr Ngerng.

Lim Li Lian (not her real name), 37, said she was waiting to see whether the government could really deliver the "better" Singapore it pledged in victory speeches.

"It has yet to be seen how the PAP will behave in parliament. Last time their 'shock' loss made them adjust. This time around they might think they have a mandate and can afford to ignore the six voices in parliament," said the Singapore Democratic Party supporter.

Alex Au, 63, a pioneering social and political blogger, said voters had chosen to "reward" the PAP for things the government had done for the public, and debates about key issues such as pension fund withdrawals and population policy had not swayed them from the ruling party.

Mr Au rejected claims that Singaporeans had voted out of fear. "A small minority might feel that way ... but I think Singaporeans are confident in this vote, in that they see the PAP will deliver as pledged," he said.

Kirsten Han, 27, another well-known blogger, said the surprise swing vote could have reflected PAP efforts to play up the terrorism threat, and also concern about a "freak" election result.

"As people see the need for a stronger opposition, those who want to vote for the opposition might think there are already enough votes against the PAP, so they just vote for the ruling party to continue to be the government," said Ms Han.

She also downplayed the perceived impact of strong support for opposition parties in social media.

"Both pro- and anti-PAP sides actively engage in social media but they just don't interface, but there are a lot of people who don't use those communication channels and mainstream media still play an active role," she said.

She believes the opposition needs to get stronger by merging small parties to pool resources and candidates, as most already share similar policy platforms.

Tan Tarn How, a senior research fellow with Institute of Policy Studies at National University of Singapore, said the Workers' Party (WP) did poorly not just because of the issue of town council management but because it was not active enough in parliament.

"At the grassroots level, the voters are still okay with the WP as it could still secure the Aljunied GRC at 50.95%. But on the national level, the role of the WP in parliament has been largely invisible," said Mr Tan.

He foresees little change in the status quo over the next five years.

"The next mission of the PAP and the government is to ensure a smooth succession and they will use this time to pick and groom the new leadership in the party," he said.

Now that the electoral dust has settled, it's time to get back to work, said Manu Bhaskaran, director of Centennial Group International.

Cyclical risks to the Singapore economy are rising and the right monetary and fiscal policies must be applied, he said.

Regionally, he added, Malaysia was facing a political crisis and Singapore is highly affected by events in its northern neighbour. The government needs to find ways to mitigate the potential risks.

"Indonesia is also turning more inward. We need to work out with Indonesia a new arrangement that is win-win for both sides," said the economist.

Social safety nets -- especially in healthcare and retirement funding -- are being developed but more needs to be done to complete the process and also to address other areas such as income insecurity in a volatile world, especially affecting middle-aged and middle-skilled workers losing their jobs, he added.

As well, he said, the government must clarify its approach to immigration. Since the widespread public opposition to its 2013 White Paper, the government has toned down its rhetoric without clearly saying what the way forward should be, said Mr Bhaskaran.