

A look-back at S'pore politics

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It was a year of surprises for Singapore politics in 2011 with a watershed general election (GE) and the retirement of several ministers.

The May 7 GE led to the defeat of three ministers at the polls.

Singapore also saw the retirement of several ministers including two former prime ministers, Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, and a new leadership team at the helm of the nation.

GE 2011 saw 82 out of the 87 constituencies contested on Nomination Day.

And after the vote count on May 7, the People's Action Party (PAP) returned to power with a two-third's majority, winning 81 seats but with a reduced percentage of votes.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged party activists to be prepared for tougher elections in future, when he spoke at a party convention in November.

"I don't expect any more clean sweeps and I don't believe we can expect any more safe wards anywhere in Singapore," Mr Lee said.

"That's the way our society is moving, that's the way our politics will evolve, and that's the way we must prepare ourselves from now."

The opposition Workers' Party (WP) won six seats, including the five-member Aljunied group representation constituency (GRC).

It is the first GRC defeat for the PAP since GRCs were introduced in 1988.

WP Chairman and MP for Aljunied GRC Sylvia Lim said: "Certainly the General Election this year has seen Singaporeans being prepared to use the vote to send certain signals to the establishment, and I think this culture would probably continue.

"To me, it is a clear desire for greater accountability. Definitely, we want to live up to our voter expectations both inside and outside of Parliament. And we do not intend to let them down.

"In terms of town management and also issues that we canvass in Parliament, we would pay attention to convince the voters they made the right choice."

Observers said politics in Singapore and in particular parliamentary sessions can be expected to be more robust over the next few years under this trend of what's been called the "new normal".

Parliamentary sessions in the new year are expected to see debates on some hot-button issues which concerned voters during the hustings

One of them would certainly be the issue of ministerial salaries.

At the swearing-in ceremony of his new Cabinet, PM Lee announced a committee to review the salaries.

The committee was expected to submit its report before the end of 2011.

Political observer Gillian Koh from the Institute of Policy Studies said: "The first point about the unhappiness is that it is pegged to private-sector salaries, pegged to the best earners.

"It's always like a casino -- you step out, you always peg it to the people who win.

"So the bottom line is that we need to understand, discuss further what is the best position we should have in Singapore, a unique system."

Government agencies and parliamentarians have also been busy responding to calls from the public for greater engagement online.

Feedback portal REACH chairman Amy Khor said: "We continue to try all-and-sundry ways to close the feedback loop and to affirm to our feedback contributors that REACH is not a black hole where no light escapes.

"Instead, the government reads and considers all feedback.

"But I think it is also useful to highlight to the public and our feedback contributors that we would have to be realistic.

"While the government can consider all feedback received, it is not possible for the government to take action on every suggestion and ideas and implement them.

"Policy making always involves trade-offs. So ultimately, the government would have to make a judgement call, take a decision based on what it sees beneficial to Singaporeans and Singapore and sustainable in the long term." Meanwhile, Young PAP chairman Teo Ser Luck said the PAP is taking a hard look at the way it does things on the ground.

"Working the ground is to resolve issues on the ground, is to really engage the citizens -- not just shaking hands or just smiling, but to really listen, talk less and listen, understand their issues and see if you can really resolve it," Mr Teo said.

"...It is important to know that each time we listen, we must make sure there is a mechanism and system that such issues are followed up and addressed.

"If we can't do it, we should also acknowledge it and respond."

While Singapore's next GE is not due till 2016, the search for potential candidates has already started both within the PAP and among the opposition.