

## **In Focus: A General Election with a 'COVID twist' - how a pandemic may shape a pivotal contest**

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It is inevitable that COVID-19 will be a defining feature of the coming General Election (GE) – both as a significant campaign issue and a major factor in how the polls will be carried out.

The massive global healthcare challenge sparked by a minuscule virus has led to a disruption of the economy and an unprecedented “circuit breaker” in Singapore, changing the way people live and threatening livelihoods.

Three weeks after exiting the circuit breaker, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Tuesday (Jun 23) called the election, which will be held on Jul 10.

“The alternative is to wait out the COVID-19 pandemic. But we have no assurance that the pandemic will be over before this Government’s term must end next April,” Mr Lee said in an address to the nation.

"An election now – when things are relatively stable – will clear the decks, and give the new Government a fresh five-year mandate," he said. He also said that COVID-19 will be with Singapore for at least a year and most probably longer, until a vaccine is developed and becomes available.

Analysts say that a scorecard for the Government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak would include items that affect all areas of people's lives - and the tally will be taken in the upcoming GE, already seen by some as the opportunity for the electorate to pass judgement on the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) next generation of leaders, dubbed widely as the 4G leadership team.

"Just like how the previous generations of leaders have had their moments of crisis management, this would definitely mark the leadership capabilities of the 4G leaders," said political analyst Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education.

Those who have been on the front line of the battle to deal with COVID-19 include Deputy Prime Minister and PM-designate Heng Swee Keat, who has seen through four Budgets to cushion the economic effects of the pandemic; Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing, who has headed efforts to secure supply chains and national stockpiles; and National Development Minister Lawrence Wong, who co-chairs the COVID-19 multi-ministry task force, and has been giving the nation regular updates on the virus situation.

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo has also had a central role to play as infections in the migrant worker community spiked in April, while Education Minister Ong Ye Kung had to manage the closure of schools and shift to home-based learning during the circuit breaker.

### **PANDEMIC ECONOMICS**

Given the economic fallout from the pandemic, with unemployment rising, experts agreed that jobs and perennial bread-and-butter issues would likely weigh even more on voters' minds this election.

"The key issues we anticipate in the campaign are first, the bread-and-butter issues of jobs, wages, career prospects especially coming out of the global COVID-19 crisis ... COVID-19 has brought fresh interest in this issue," said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy research director at the Institute of Policy.

The Government is spending billions to subsidise Singaporean workers' paychecks, create jobs and retrain workers in successive Budgets, and drawing unprecedented amounts from Singapore's national reserves.

Dr Koh said: "We see the incumbent emphasising that it is sparing no effort in 'protecting workers' ... (but) opposition parties are likely to spell out their views if those plans will be enough and whether there are segments that feel that they have been neglected."

## **CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

A second set of issues would revolve around whether Singapore's leaders are seen to have got the better of a virus that has left many world leaders foundering.

Some, such as Taiwan's Tsai Ing-Wen, New Zealand's Jacinda Arden and South Korea's Moon Jae-In, have boosted confidence in their leadership with their handling of the crisis, with Mr Moon's Democratic Party scoring a landslide win in April.

Despite Singapore's comparatively high number of COVID-19 cases, the country has avoided the high death tolls and scenes of overwhelmed hospitals replayed in many countries around the world.

"For Singapore, much will ride on how much voters emphasise and assign responsibility for the movement from the supposed 'gold standard' of testing and pandemic control earlier in the year to the rapid rise in the number of infections - particularly among migrant workers - that led to the circuit breaker," said political science professor Chong Ja Ian.

IPS' Dr Koh was of the view that there has been a "remarkable level of engagement, transparency and accountability" in the Government's handling of the pandemic so far.

"The multi-ministry task force has been at pains to share what the transmission numbers are, what they are learning about the science to COVID-19, and why the government was taking the measures it did," she said.

But Dr Tan said that there have been questions raised about how the government has attempted to control the spread of the pandemic within the community.

"While the government has made tremendous efforts to mitigate this unprecedented crisis, there have been lots of questions about the decision-making process and the measures that the government have had in place during the circuit breaker phase," he said.

## **"FLIGHT TO SAFETY"?**

As well as passing judgement on how Singapore has coped with the crisis, voters may also contemplate how the opposition parties look to exploit COVID-19 as a campaign issue.

That being so, and given the Herculean scope of the crisis, would it benefit the opposition to poke holes in the Government's COVID-19 response?

This is especially as Cabinet Ministers have repeatedly called for unity in the fight against the virus in Parliament and on national broadcasts on Singapore's COVID-19 future.

Although he has called for a thorough review of the COVID-19 response in the future, Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh said in Parliament on Jun 5 that the party had refrained from "publicly criticising the Government on its handling of an unprecedented crisis in ways that would undermine the national effort" - highlighting the sensitivities of being perceived as armchair critics.

Associate Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University said that taking on the Government on its handling of COVID-19 is seen as "par for the course", as long as voters do not perceive their campaigns as undermining national unity.

"There will be a variety of views of how the outbreak and the economic impact have been handled and voters will like to see the issues aired so that the voters' concerns and interests are addressed post-election," he said.

"It will be foolhardy for any government to say that it has done enough. There will always be gaps, unmet needs, and new issues. I expect the PAP to make the case that it is prepared to do more and that it has the capacity to help Singaporeans overcome the immense challenges that lie ahead."

Some observers said that the PAP has already begun campaigning with the recent national broadcasts delivered by key Cabinet Ministers that have dwelled on themes like Singapore's future post-COVID and the need to strengthen the nation's social cohesion in a time of crisis.

"The national broadcasts can be seen as the government's attempt to showcase its achievements and also acts as a form of campaigning rally for the government to unite Singaporeans during this period of great uncertainty," said Dr Felix Tan.

"It targets Singaporeans' sense of pragmatism. There will be those who fear that there might be a possibility that a government, besides the PAP will necessarily lead to a situation that Singapore will never be able to get out of."

This is why, as much as the opposition can use the COVID-19 as a political weapon, it will most likely be futile, he added.

"Given how severe this crisis and its ramifications have been, there will be little motivation for a stronger 'alternative' voice," he said.

Dr Koh made a similar point, saying that voters worried about the ongoing crisis would be more inclined to support the incumbents in "flight to safety" effect.

"They will chose a relatively more experienced team or party than the opposition if they are not sure the latter can make positive contributions to the need to maintain livelihoods and also manage local municipal demands."

### **"COVID-19 TWIST"**

Despite being held in the midst of a global pandemic, the election is unlikely to be reduced to just COVID-19 and related issues, said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan, but the coronavirus will often be the segue into discussing other issues, whether they relate to government accountability, immigration or the costs of living.

“Opposition parties will not let the issues on the election trail be scoped so narrowly, and voters will also seek an airing from the parties on issues that concern them,” he said.

“The PAP could pay the price if it is seen as framing the election issues too narrowly. For the opposition, they will also have to be mindful of voters’ concerns as well and not to be seen to be tone-deaf to how COVID-19 is impacting people and businesses.”

One issue that has been a theme in the past two General Elections, but has now got a “COVID twist”, is immigration and population growth, said Dr Koh.

“Opposition parties have been bringing up this issue as an outcome of what happened to foreign workers in the COVID crisis here,” she said, adding that the economic downturn brought on by the crisis may mean fewer foreign workers being hired here.

“While local workers may suffer, the government provides support for them to companies. Opposition parties will have to engage in the details of these programmes and explain if these provide the security Singaporean workers seek,” she said.

## **BREAK FROM THE PAST**

The crisis has also led to much talk about a post-COVID Singapore, and a break from the past, which could see other concerns being aired.

Said Assoc Prof Tan: “Other issues such as social inequality, social injustice, climate change (and) digitalisation’s impact will feature in any conversation on the remaking of Singapore.

“This might be the first election where material issues (jobs, livelihoods, costs of living) will compete with “post-material issues”, or issues that speak to societal values, for air time ... The ‘crisis of a generation’ will certainly spawn a plethora of issues about where Singapore is heading.”

Social inequality will feature in any discussion about the economy during the hustings, as would Singapore’s policies toward migrant workers, said Assoc Prof Chong.

“In particular, voters will have to decide on whether past approaches to the economy are sufficient for addressing the challenges ahead or if key aspects of Singapore’s way of doing business needs fundamental readjustment to face the emerging circumstances,” he said.

He added that social fissures, inequality, reliance on migrant labour and their treatment will affect voters’ lives either directly or indirectly.

“The pandemic highlights the interconnectedness among these issues and how they really are not separate. This set of issues need to be managed comprehensively, with adequate deliberation and care rather than rushed through under the guise of ‘efficiency’. Haste might not serve anyone well in the end.”

## **POFMA, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

Dr Koh said that issues related to freedom of expression, specifically laws that deal with online falsehoods, may arise.

The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) came into effect last year despite criticism from some quarters. Directives to label online posts as falsehoods

have since been issued to several parties, including opposition politicians and editors of alternative news sites.

**“This is a vexing set of issues as the balance is between expression and wanting quality debate and ensuring the election process is not undermined by foreign interference,” said Dr Koh.**

While eclipsed by COVID-19, POFMA and changes to Presidential Election procedures are issues that would resonate with voters, added Dr Felix Tan.

“There has been much unhappiness over how the government has been a little too hasty in rushing through decisions on these two issues,” he added.

Former presidential candidate Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who had challenged constitutional changes that led to the 2017 Presidential Elections being reserved for Malay candidates, is now leading the Progress Singapore Party in its first General Election.

Assoc Prof Chong said that an underrated issue is the climate crisis: “Many voters usually pay limited attention to environmental issues, but issues like the emergence of new diseases and pandemics relate to environmental degradation. There is a chance that it could become a bigger electoral issue.”

Conducting an election during a pandemic may also result in unforeseen contingencies - such as a major spike in infections and community transmissions during the campaign period or voting, said Assoc Prof Chong.

“This could affect the results of elections or erode the legitimacy of their results. Much as we would like to avoid such situations, the pandemic has so far proven that it can unleash previously unexpected situations that are challenging to handle,” he said.

### **"HOTLY CONTESTED IN THE VIRTUAL REALM"**

There have been contingency plans made to mitigate the spread of the virus should an election be called, with guidelines issued by the Elections Department this month.

Much of the flesh pressing and the drama of mass rallies that defined past elections will be impossible, as gatherings of more than five people are not allowed in Phase 2 of Singapore's re-opening. In place of rallies and walkabouts, election candidates will get an average of three minutes of airtime on Channel 5 and livestreaming facilities for online rallies.

**“Political parties and candidates will need to leverage digital campaigning tools more extensively, compared to the past elections,” said Dr Carol Soon, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.**

**“Irrespective of the party candidates hail from, they will have to contend with information clutter, people's short attention span, and the lack of physical intimacy and social cues when interacting with their constituencies.”**

Experts disagreed on whether an election carried out largely online will benefit opposition parties or the incumbents, with some saying that less resources will be required to carry out campaigning online, and others commenting that the lack of physical rallies - which have always had far larger turnouts for opposition parties - would be a major disadvantage for opposition candidates.

Dr Soon said that past research has shown the advantages that bigger political parties have in the real world spill over to the online world, as they had more funds to conduct more sophisticated forms of digital campaigning. However, the growth of user-generated content and peer-to-peer platforms in the past decade, has levelled the playing field for political parties.

"Now, there is an even wider range of low cost and no cost options for election campaigning. They include social networking sites, live videos, instant messaging apps and online meeting platforms," she said.

"Creating interactive and compelling content that engages and resonates with the concerns of constituents is mission critical for online campaigning. Parties, big and small, should have dedicated manpower, full-time or on a volunteer basis, to develop and execute an integrated online strategy."

Furthermore, the new Constituency Political Broadcasts for all candidates on TV enable political parties to leverage the power of TV, which is one of the most used and trusted media during election time, she added.

Said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan: "The election will likely be noticeably quieter in the real world but I expect the campaign to be hotly contested in the virtual realm. So this seeming incongruence is yet another likely feature of a COVID-19 GE."