

## **Leader of the Opposition: A turning point but also a 'double-edged sword', say analysts**

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The appointment of a Leader of the Opposition is a significant move, but whether and how it changes Singapore's political system in substance remains to be seen, analysts told CNA.

The office will also help the Government manage the pace of political change in Singapore, said one political observer.

On Tuesday, it was announced that as the Leader of the Opposition, Workers' Party (WP) chief Pritam Singh will get additional parliamentary privileges, resources to hire more legislative assistants and double the pay of a Member of Parliament (MP).

Accepting the position, Mr Singh said: "The Leader of the Opposition appointment carries with it many additional responsibilities that I will have to shoulder.

"The road ahead will not be easy, but I thank Singaporeans for their support and encouragement."

He announced that he will donate half of his allowance, and he is to speak in greater detail on the approach WP will take in Parliament over the next term during the debate on the President's address on Aug 24.

Political observer Felix Tan called the new office a "good start", and said that with more resources and information for the opposition, this could push debate in Parliament to a different level.

"After more than 50 years, Singapore's political landscape is finally entering a new phase. The recognition of the role the opposition would surely put the Workers' Party in good stead," said the associate lecturer in international relations at SIM Global Education.

"So, now, the ball is in the WP's court to produce and introduce feasible policies."

### **"KEY TURNING POINT"**

Authorities said on Tuesday that the Leader of the Opposition will receive allowances to hire up to three additional legislative assistants on top of the allowances all MPs receive for one legislative assistant and one secretarial assistant.

In addition to the government data or information available to other MPs, Mr Singh will receive confidential briefings by the Government on "select matters of national security and external relations, and in the event of a national crisis or emergency".

In Parliament, he will generally be given the right of first response among MPs and to ask the lead question to the ministers. He will also be given more time to speak, equivalent to political officeholders.

His duties include leading the opposition in presenting alternative views in parliamentary debates on policies, Bills and motions, and leading the scrutiny of the Government's positions and actions in Parliament.

Mr Leonard Lim, country director for Singapore for government affairs consultancy Vriens & Partners, said that this was a “key turning point in Singapore’s political landscape”.

“This entrenches the role of the opposition in Singapore’s Parliament, confers a higher level of authority on Pritam within the House, and guarantees more air-time for a greater diversity of views to be aired in Parliament,” he said.

However, the appointment does not change Singapore’s political system in form and in substance, said political analyst Eugene Tan, an associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University.

“The LO (Leader of the Opposition) office is not designed to create a new parliamentary system but to reinforce the existing one by formally recognising and institutionalising the role of a responsible, credible, and loyal opposition in Singapore’s constitutional system of government,” he said.

“It is about furthering the goal of a collaborative system of governance for the benefit of Singapore and Singaporeans.”

Where change may take place would be in Singaporeans’ understanding, expectations and demands of the opposition, he added.

“A nuanced understanding of the role of Parliament and how it contributes to our governance can result in a more mature political system.”

### **A SHADOW CABINET?**

Analysts pointed out that the move needs to be seen in the Singapore context where the number of opposition MPs remains small.

There will be 10 elected Workers’ Party MPs and two Non-Constituency MPs from the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) in the 14th Parliament, a total of 12. The People’s Action Party (PAP) retains its super majority with 83, or nearly 90 per cent, of the 93 parliamentary seats.

In countries with similar parliamentary systems, the Leader of the Opposition leads a shadow Cabinet with senior members of the opposition who mirror the role of political office holders, and provide the semblance of an alternative government-in-waiting.

But this may not be feasible in Singapore, where there are 15 ministries and its Cabinet has 20 ministers, including those under the Prime Minister’s Office.

“Singapore is going to be different from what you have in other countries because usually the idea is that the leader would be the head of the shadow government,” said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies.

“In this case ... one could argue that 12 might be enough to man all the key portfolios of government, so it is within Pritam Singh’s prerogative to decide if he would like to organise the opposition parliamentarians into a form of shadow government. It is entirely within his prerogative but also his political imagination to work within what is now possible.”

Mr Singh could divide the need to present alternative views in Parliament according to portfolios, Dr Koh added, and this would be moving towards “a rudimentary form of shadow government”.

Mr Lim of Vriens & Partners said that expecting a shadow government was premature given the small number of opposition MPs, and while it may be possible in the future, it is unlikely to occur during this term of government.

It is not helpful to juxtapose the office against that in other jurisdictions as the state of the opposition in Singapore is “vastly different” compared with the established democracies, said Assoc Prof Tan.

“Ours is still very much a one-party dominant system whereas the established democracies are either longstanding two-party or multi-party systems,” he said.

On whether the appointment of a leader of the opposition is a step towards a two-party system, Dr Koh said it was not necessarily so.

“The way to a two-party system is through the ballot box. It has to be about the numbers and the popular will,” she said.

“It remains to be seen whether WP wishes to build itself up and whether it's got the resources and aspiration to present an alternative government. It remains to be seen whether that is their strategy or not, they may choose not to, they may choose to. And this is something that can evolve over the next four to five years.”

## **MANAGING POLITICAL CHANGE**

The Prime Minister has said that the formalisation of the Leader of the Opposition was a recognition that while Singaporeans want a PAP Government, they also want a diversity of voices and alternative views in Parliament.

“I look forward to more vigorous but constructive debates in Parliament. I hope our colleagues across the aisle will step up to play their role of a responsible and loyal opposition,” said Mr Lee at the swearing-in ceremony of political office holders on Monday.

“Their duty is not merely to raise criticisms and ask questions of the Government, necessary as these functions are. But also, more importantly, to put forward serious policy alternatives to be scrutinised and debated.”

For the PAP Government, the Leader of the Opposition office seeks to accommodate the desire for the opposition to play a bigger role in Singapore’s political system, said Assoc Prof Tan.

“In so doing, it may help the Government to manage the pace of political change in Singapore - incrementalism is the preferred watchword,” he said.

Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) will have to find new relevance, Assoc Prof Tan said. The GPCs were set up by the PAP in 1987 to scrutinise the legislation and programmes of various ministries.

“Remaining as they are - as a makeshift internal opposition within the government - will not be feasible,” he said. “They were conceived at a time when opposition was much weaker. Today, the idea of the PAP backbenchers functioning as an ersatz opposition is seen as an inherent contradiction that will not work at all.”

Dr Koh said that for the detractors who think that this is a state with no opposition and no contestation, it is a way to shift and institutionalise the role of the political opposition in Parliament.

“It is a representation of the fact that we do have a contestable system. The potential is there but the popular will isn't, nor did the parties, any party in GE2020 argue to be an alternative government,” she said.

Mr Lim said that the PAP would also benefit from a richer buffet of ideas and greater scrutiny of policies.

“Singapore and Singaporeans will be the ultimate winners through policies that have gone through a much more rigorous level of scrutiny before being passed and implemented,” he said.

### **“DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD” FOR OPPOSITION**

However, this development can be a "double-edged sword" for the WP and the opposition in general, Assoc Prof Tan said.

“If the LO office does result in the public having higher expectations of the opposition, that is a good outcome but that is unlikely to materialise in the term of the new Parliament,” he said. “The resource disparity between the PAP Government and the opposition remain significant.”

He said that if done well, the office would be a credit to the WP and the opposition, showing what they are capable of and being able to take on greater responsibilities, but if done poorly, then the public may see the current limitations of the opposition.

“Ultimately, it is what the opposition makes of the office that truly matters.”

Mr Lim said that a good performance by Mr Singh will burnish the WP's brand name and improve the robustness of debate in Parliament.

“I think it will raise expectations on Pritam, but that can only be seen in a good light, both for the PAP, the WP, and Singapore,” he said.

“If Pritam performs well, we could see further enhancement of the WP brand as a rational opposition party with good alternative ideas rather than just one that 'checks' the PAP's every move. This would lead to positive knock-on effects in terms of volunteer recruitment and ground awareness for WP.”

On the prospect of the WP and PSP working together in Parliament, Assoc Prof Tan said that this can be expected on issues where their positions are aligned.

Mr Singh has said that he will confer with the PSP NCMPs and extend appropriate support to them.

“Both parties can attempt to develop a common position on key issues of the day and seek to persuade Singaporeans that their policy position is superior to the PAP Government,” Assoc Prof Tan said.

“Having a united front is another means by which they can show that opposition unity is real and, more importantly, that it can be impactful in staking a particular position or challenging the Government.”