

Conceptualising Political Power in Singapore Following the Pandemic Election, and Amidst the Virus of Delusion

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My presentation differs greatly from that of Dr Teo Kay Key's and the IPS survey. That presentation looked at the issue from the point of view of the voters. Mine will look at it largely from the perspective of the political parties. Though both presentations might be at a tangent to each other, they are actually quite complementary. Let me now establish some context.

Context

Manichean view of the world. The first context is my contention that an increasing number of people have a Manichean view of the world, viewing things largely in terms of a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

How to approach political power. The second context relates to how political power should be viewed. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair was characterised as a person who viewed political power as a priceless Ming Vase being carried across a polished floor by a museum curator. Meaning, if you wish to attain and maintain political power you should always adopt a cautious approach and not get bogged down by insignificant elements or those on the fringes, or you will slip and the vase will be shattered.

Let me now highlight just five points.

POINT ONE: The significance of the PAP popular vote above 60%

GE2020 was a good result for the Workers' Party, and a bad result for the PAP. A bad result does not equate to a disaster for the PAP, as claimed by some foreign academics. The PAP secured 83 out of 93 fully-elected seats, and its popular vote kept above the 60% level, as it did in GE2011, constituting not just statistical, but psychological significance.

POINT TWO: The objective of the fringe parties

All the fringe parties that went into GE2020 – and I do not consider the PSP to be a fringe party, by the way – all the fringe parties were not expecting to win any seats but were banking on the possibility that there would be an implosion within the WP because of the litigation over AHTC, and the fact that the WP only barely clung-on to Aljunied in GE2015. So, their calculations were that a WP implosion would mean NCMP seats could be picked up by them. They calculated wrongly.

POINT THREE: An authoritarian regime enabled by those with authoritarian traits

The contention I make is that the majority of Singaporeans are, to varying degrees, socially and politically conservative in nature. Pushing this point further, we can draw a distinction between an authoritarian regime, on the one hand, and a significant portion of a population who display

largely authoritarian traits, on the other. Is the Government to be ascribed 100% blame for whatever ills are afflicting Singapore, or has much of the population enabled such ills? It is noteworthy that in the wake of GE2020 many commentators ascribed 100% blame to the Government for virtually everything.

POINT FOUR: Moderate opposition versus the real enemy infected with the Virus of Delusion

(i) The actual results of GE2020 underscore what has held true for the past three decades: that only a moderate alternative to the PAP, which is not too confrontational in nature, will be able to take seats away from the PAP. The WP referred to itself, as it did in GE2015, as Rational, Responsible, and Respectable. There is no fourth R– no Radical. The WP has no radical agenda. And quite right too.

(ii) Even as the WP has characterised itself as Rational, Responsible, and Respectable, a small but vocal segment of voters, largely hardcore anti-PAP voters, were well before the COVID-19 pandemic already infected with another virus – the Virus of Delusion. They choose not to be guided by the evidence. They work on the basis that their personal situation is more important than objective facts. As such, they create their own reality, accentuated in social media echo-chambers. They attack the WP if they see that the party is not robustly opposing the PAP and not supporting those who run afoul of laws that they consider anti-democratic or socially unjust.

A British parliamentary saying goes as follows: “The opposition occupies the benches in front of you, but the enemy sits behind you.” For the WP, the PAP is the opposition, but the real enemy constitutes a number of radicals in the hardcore anti-PAP element who are infected with the Virus of Delusion. One should remember that three decades ago Mr Chiam See Tong built up a politically moderate SDP only to see others in the party move it to a confrontational direction, destroying opposition chances for a generation. Already in this election, one activist claimed that Mr Chiam, when he was an MP, had been humiliated by the PAP. This was clearly an attempt to revise recent political history. This would have escaped most people’s attention; but it came across as an attempt to create a false new narrative about the 1990s.

(iii) If you look at the WP’s GE2020 manifesto, it is the most detailed manifesto put out by all the parties. It contains such a level of detail that you can take it that if you do not find what you are looking for in it then the WP does not support such a policy. The WP has, therefore, been upfront about what it supports, and what it does not support. No one can claim that the WP secured 10 parliamentary seats on the basis of a false prospectus.

POINT FIVE: Prognosis for the political parties

(i) What is the prognosis for the PAP, the WP, and the PSP? The PAP can claw back support, at least in terms of regaining part of the popular vote it lost. But it has to address concretely the serious concerns that led some voters moving away from the party in GE2020, accentuated by the pernicious effects of the pandemic. These remedies include ensuring that wages keep up with the rising cost of living; improving job security; coming up with a viable solution to HDB lease decay; adopting measures to allow Singaporeans greater access to their CPF monies, and so on.

(ii) For the WP, it might be too cliched to suggest that its ability to enlarge its parliamentary presence is only constrained by the size of its ambitions. It is not as simple as that. There are a number of factors to consider when looking at the WP’s prospects at the next election. Even

if the PAP makes a fightback at the national level, as it now appears to be doing, the WP would not be too adversely affected as it retains an effective localised strategy, concentrated largely on the east of the island. Also, the WP's approach is to knit together a coalition of voters across most demographics; it will not attempt to put together an unrealistic coalition across the alternative parties when the strength of the parties is so uneven and the policies and approaches to opposition so different. That will merely dilute the WP's identity and erode its electoral prospects.

(iii) Moving on to the PSP: the question is whether the two PSP NCMPs can return to Parliament as fully-elected MPs and whether they will bring other PSP candidates with them? To answer that question, we should look at recent history for guidance. It would indicate that if you were a WP NCMP your chances of becoming a fully elected MP are 80%. On the other hand, if you were an NCMP from another party then your chances of returning to Parliament are severely limited. The PSP lacks branding and, with no fully elected MPs, it will be a major challenge for the party to establish a viable presence on the ground in West Coast GRC. And the possibility of the PSP establishing a tacit alliance with the WP, is somewhat doubtful at this stage. After initial comments by the WP leadership of cooperating with the PSP, that early unqualified support appeared to have been dialled back somewhat when the new Leader of the Opposition gave his maiden speech in Parliament. The support is now more equivocal and conditional. The fact is that there are significant policy differences between the PSP and the WP, and these differences cannot be papered over.

(iv) The other alternative parties, mostly fringe elements, will likely be shut out because they will be denied the oxygen of publicity. They can only rely mostly on social media. The mainstream media will likely follow what is the general convention globally – that only political parties which have a legislative presence should get media coverage. If you are talking about the maturing of Singapore's politics, that indeed should be the way forward, by following established international practice.

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