

**IPS Corporate Associates Breakfast, 28 April 2011:
“Singapore General Election 2011: What Moves the Voters?”**

Speaker: Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Senior Research Fellow

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This is a summary of a discussion at an Institute of Policy Studies Corporate Associates Breakfast on the Singapore General Election 2011 (GE2011). The meeting was held on 28 April 2011.

The speaker Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow of the Politics and Government cluster at IPS began with a historical overview of electoral contests in Singapore. Since 82 out of 87 seats would be contested in GE2011, the highest since independence, 94.1% of total electors would be going to the polls on 7 May 2011 given the system of compulsory voting here. The reason why this was significant was because ever since 1991 when the political opposition collaborated to mount a ‘by-election’ strategy returning the People’s Action Party (PAP) to government on nomination day, the level of contestation had been low. It was not until 2006 that the political opposition reverted to the strategy of contesting as many seats as it could, denying the PAP the prospect of being returned to government on nomination day. This was in recognition that the PAP strategy of ‘votes for upgrading’ introduced in 1997 had been a very strong counter-strategy to the ‘by-election’ effect. She added that 46% of the total voters were born after independence in 1965 and 26% of the total voters were born in 1975 or later. They would very likely appreciate the prospect of choice and competition at this election.

Electoral Contests in Singapore

Year	Total Seats	Contested Seats	Change in vote for PAP (%)	% of vote for PAP	Non PAP/ Opposition Seats Held	% of Electors who could vote
1955	25	25	-	8.7	22	100.0
1959	51	51	45.4	54.1	8	100.0
1963	51	51	-7.2	46.9	14	100.0
1968	58	7	-	86.7	0	11.2
1972	65	57	-16.3	70.4	0	89.5
1976	69	53	3.7	74.1	0	78.2
1980	75	38	3.5	77.6	0	53.1
1981 ¹ (Anson by-election)	1	1	-	47.1	1	-
1984	79	49	-12.8	64.8	2	63.2
1988 ²	81	70	-1.6	63.2	1	87.3
1991 ³	81	40	-2.2	61	4	50.1
1992 ⁴ (Marine Parade by-election)	4	4	-	72.9	0	-
1997 ⁵	83	36	+ 4	65	2	40.7
2001	84	29	+ 10.3	75.3	2	33.2
2006 ⁶	84	47	-8.7	66.6	2	56.6
2011	87	82				94.1



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1. 1981: Anson by-election, election of Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam
 - 1979: Death of Anson PAP Member of Parliament P. Govindaswamy, Devan Nair wins by-election
 - 1981: Devan Nair resigns to become president, paving the way for another by-election
2. 1988: Introduction of Group Representation Constituency System
3. 1991: Opposition parties introduce by-Election Strategy?
4. 1992: Marine Parade by-election called by Goh Chok Tong
5. 1997: People Action Party introduces votes for Upgrading Strategy?
6. 2006: Opposition parties abandon by-Election Strategy? more than half of electoral constituencies contested



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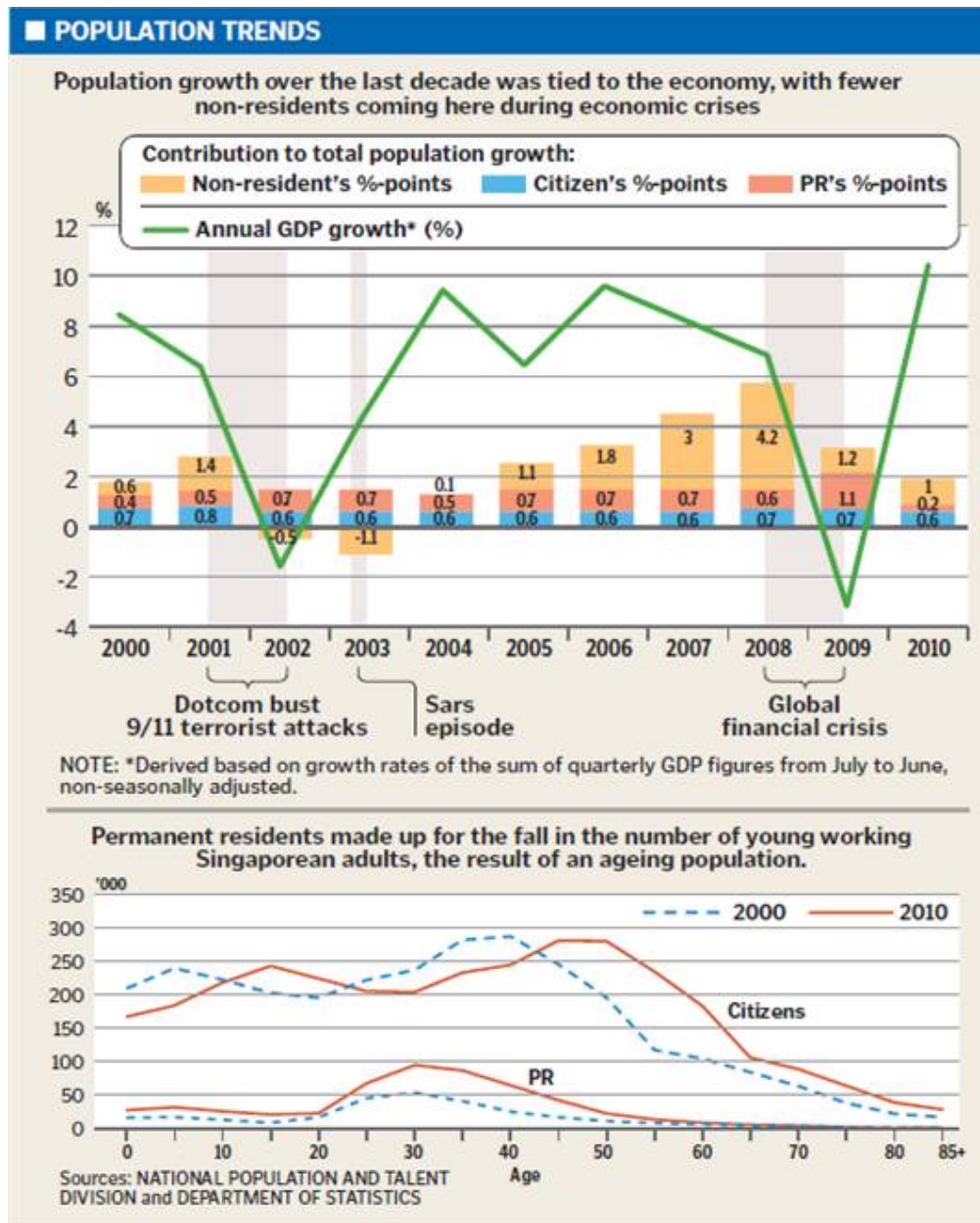


Dr Koh said that there were four broad categories of issues that would play out in GE2011:

The first category had to do with the voters' reading of how the PAP government had dealt with the unexpected situations that had emerged since the last election in May 2006. These situations tested the PAP's capacity to govern and the public's level of trust in it – the escape of terrorist Mas Selamat, the recession resulting from the global financial crisis, the budget for the Youth Olympic Games, sky-rocketing property prices, reforms to the Mother Tongue curriculum and the floods of mid-2010. While remedial action had been taken to address many of these, the opposition was likely to play this up in their election rhetoric. How would voters judge the PAP government? Given the level of complexity and uncertainty faced by all governments today, it may be important not just for the state to move to a 'safe-to-fail' paradigm of governance, but to equally move Singaporeans away from the fail-safe mentality too, otherwise, the level of public expectation towards any government that is voted in after the election on 7 May 2011 would be untenably high.

Related to the first category, the second set of issues centred around the theme of accountability. Opposition parties were likely to try to persuade voters that it is important to vote for a system of checks and balances, transparency and accountability. In the discussion, they would cite issues like the Mas Selamat escape, the investment decisions of Temasek Holdings and the Government Investment Corporation of Singapore, the management of town council funds in the context of the financial crisis, and the social impact of licensing casinos in the year-old integrated resorts.

The third category of issues related to economic growth and its impact on wages and livelihoods. It was clear that the PAP government had spent much of its past term in office dealing with this set of issues, with the initiative to make Workfare permanent and funding it through an increase in the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the focus on productivity growth, the increased commitment to education, job-redesign, re-skilling of workers, lifelong learning and a calibration of the foreign worker policy. There were many objectives that the PAP government aimed to achieve – full employment, higher median wages, tempering of income disparities, social mobility, the prevention of a social underclass and inclusive growth. Some of the measures to achieve these had been proposed by the Economic Strategies Committee. Even though it is a laundry list of social development goals, its record is likely to be scrutinised in the election. Dr Koh took the participants through various sets of national statistics on the government's record, among which she pointed out that through the decade, the Median Household Income from Work in Employed Households had increased by the order of 42% in nominal prices, from 2000 to 2010. In the same period, the Gini Coefficient of Employed Households ranged from 0.444 to 0.489 at its peak in 2007. While there had been concern about its absolute level, she asked if the relative change in the past decade suggested that the situation was grave. The opposition parties would read the figures differently and offer their views on what the 'magic bullet' might be to achieve what each thinks is the appropriate social objective of economic growth.



Source: The Straits Times, 13 Jan 2011

The fourth category of issues related to the place of foreigners in Singapore. The PAP government had been at pains to share with the public its economic and social assumptions behind an ‘opportunistic policy’ of welcoming a large number of foreigners to Singapore’s shores (see table below.) It had also tried to attend to the second-order social and cultural ‘costs’ of this economic strategy. At the last National Day Rally Speech, the Prime Minister (PM) Mr Lee Hsien Loong introduced a broad-range of measures to mitigate these costs – from housing to transportation, education to social integration.

GE2011 was already a watershed election for the political opposition in Singapore, given the bold moves of veteran opposition parliamentarians, Mr Chiam See Tong and Mr Low Thia Khiang to helm teams in the group representation constituencies of Bishan-Toa Payoh and Aljunied respectively. It was also notable for the quantity of quality candidates attracted to opposition tickets. The PAP had not disappointed with its usual slate of high quality candidates and not five but six 'heavenly beings', that is, people with the potential to be office-holders. Dr Koh provided detailed profiles of the parties with stakes in the 2011 campaign.

She noted that this choice and competition was the intended effect of the electoral reforms introduced in May 2009 by PM Lee, who lowered the barriers to entry for opposition parties, provided the carrot of the 'consolation prizes' (the expansion of the Non-constituency Member of Parliament scheme) as well as the relaxation of rules on electioneering on the Internet. The reforms were themselves a recognition by the PAP of the fact that the Singapore polity had matured, society had become more diverse, and the populace desired to see a good representation of this diversity in Parliament. The government had in the past term of office also signalled time and again that it was comfortable with public debates on difficult issues of policy and values – from gay rights to minimum wage legislation.

Dr Koh said that it remained to be seen what the following ten days would throw up. Elections did have a dynamic of their own and it was difficult to anticipate outcomes especially when almost all the constituencies were contested and the key opposition parties had fielded their 'A' teams in a very focused manner. This was especially true of the Workers' Party, the Singapore Democratic Party, and the Singapore People's Party. She discussed the constituencies that might be of particular interest on Polling Night.

When asked how the voters must view GE2011, she said that the ground was highly segmented and it would be up to the different parties to decide which groups they wanted to appeal to. If nothing else, voters would remember it as an election of 'choice and competition'; a particularly demanding one as they weighed up all the issues at stake for their personal future and that of the country.

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