

Report on Forum with Political Parties on Vision and Plans Post-GE2020

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Dr Gillian Koh and representatives from invited political parties.

On 22 October, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted the third and final forum in its IPS Online Post-GE2020 series where members of political parties that have representation in the 14th Parliament of Singapore shared their analysis of the general election held on 10 July 2020 in Singapore (GE2020) as well as their parties' plans over the new term. The earlier forums that were similarly held on Facebook Live discussed [voters' attitudes to the election](#) and the [use of media during the election campaign](#).

This forum was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at IPS. The panellists were Ms Rahayu Mahzam, Member of the People's Action Party (PAP), Member of Parliament (MP) (Jurong GRC) and Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Health; Mr Louis Chua, Member of The Workers' Party (WP) and MP (Sengkang GRC); and Mr Francis Yuen, Assistant Secretary-General of the Progress Singapore Party

(PSP). The [video](#) of the event has drawn more than 10,000 views to date and over 400 comments on the [Facebook event page](#).

Starting the forum, Dr Koh posed three questions on the parties' internal analysis of their performance at GE2020, their plans to build their internal capacity and support base going forward, and their policy agenda for the 14th Parliament. That was followed by a question-and-answer session with the online audience.

Analysis of GE2020

On the analysis of the respective parties' performance in GE2020, Ms Rahayu noted that Secretary-General of the PAP Lee Hsien Loong had recognised at the start of the hustings that it was going to be a hard-fought election because of the anxieties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic around the issues of jobs, livelihoods and cost of living.

Looking ahead, she said the party plans to engage society as widely as possible and develop policies that demonstrate to Singaporeans that their views do translate into tangible outcomes. She said that the PAP knows it has to cater to differing aspirations but more critically, take care of the vulnerable. She added that the party would raise the quality of its communications capacity especially in the social media space.

Mr Louis Chua of WP said his party took the risk of an opposition wipe-out seriously but campaigned on the principle of being part of the system of checks and balances that are needed in Parliament and on the slogan, "Make your vote count".

He also noted that the WP relied on the support of unpaid volunteers and knows it needs to continue to do three things — keep its ear to the ground, develop principled policy positions based on those ground-up views, which means it would spare no effort in putting in the leg work to do so, and also continue to develop its capacity to engage the public online.

Mr Francis Yuen of PSP said that while his party was a newcomer to the scene, it was disappointed that it did not wrest a constituency in GE2020. It was nonetheless cheered that it now has two Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) seats arising from the close contest in West Coast GRC.

Looking ahead, PSP will continue to select and nurture credible candidates for the next election. It is also conscious that it must keep track of the political attitudes and sentiments in a segmented fashion, engage voters on the issues of that matter to them, and keep up with trends in media engagement to prepare the party for the next general election.

Building Internal Capacity and Support Base

On the question of building internal capacity, Ms Rahayu said the PAP would try to improve its communications and social media engagement. She also highlighted the need to leverage activists to engage voters, in order to build trust and improve accountability. She said it is important to allow space for the public to share its ideas, raise the quality of the policy formulation process, but always working also to prevent the rise of political polarisation seen in other countries.

Mr Chua said the WP had attracted new supporters since the election. While it had raised the number of MPs in Parliament to 10 (from the seven previously), and WP Secretary-General Pritam Singh now had more resources with his appointment as Leader of the Opposition (LO), the WP is not yet able to form a shadow government. What it would do is to organise its work around five broad domains:

- Health, ageing and retirement adequacy;
- Jobs, businesses and the economy;
- Education, inequality and the cost of living;
- Housing, transport and infrastructure; and
- National sustainability, which is a broad area about how to ensure Singapore continues to thrive far into the future for successive generations.

The PSP's Mr Yuen said its NCMPs will demonstrate that they are moderate, responsible and constructive in their roles and will draw innovative ideas and members from the ground especially among young graduates. It will also build up the "soul" of the party, focusing on compassion and placing the interests of the people at the heart of what they do.

Policy Planks for the 14th Parliament

On policy agenda, Ms Rahayu said the PAP government's key concern was to help people deal with stressors arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. She reiterated how the government has provided a support package that amounts to almost S\$100 billion and that it has targeted support for businesses and workers.

She however conceded that this crisis has a long tail and the PAP must continue to attend to the longer-term issues like healthcare, housing, recognising Singaporeans' concerns for fairness and equity. The government aims to broaden platforms for conversations, as indicated by engagements like the Youth Action Challenge, the Emerging Stronger Conversations, and the consultations around gender equality.

Responding to an audience member's question as to whether there is consensus internally on when it would like for Singapore to adopt a minimum wage, Mr Louis Chua said it would propose implementing it immediately. He stated that the WP was not against the government's current policy of the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) but if it is going to take a while to implement across other sectors, a minimum wage policy will be needed to support low-wage workers now.

Mr Chua said that the WP did not set out to agree or disagree with the government on any policy position but establishes its own position based on principles and the sense of what would be for the betterment of Singapore and Singaporeans. He shared that other policy areas that the WP will work on are redundancy insurance and Housing and Development Board (HDB) reforms.

Noting a question from the online audience about PSP's living wage policy and the seeming contradiction in wanting to raise wages yet reduce business costs, Mr Francis Yuen drew from his experience in managing several multi-national companies throughout his career. He said wages are not only the cost of doing business, which include expenditure on rentals, utilities and so on. There are many ways to improve on business processes, productivity and profits so that companies can afford better wages.

Mr Yuen provided a detailed presentation of the PSP' key policy platforms, his party's vision to build a strong and united Singapore based on the values of the National Pledge, the sharing of the fruits of growth, creating better livelihoods for Singaporeans and an engaged compassionate society where ideas flourish. PSP would champion holistic education for youth, environmental protection and sustainability.

Migration and Population

Turning to the hot-button issue of population growth, a question from the audience focused on how foreigner inflow can be better managed and whether more focus could be given to allowing for permanent migration among those who have ties with Singapore.

Ms Rahayu first stressed the need to take a step back to see how Singapore works, and that because Singapore is a "small red dot dependent on human capital", we cannot afford to send the signal that drives out companies that can easily look elsewhere for viable places to operate. She did not believe Singaporeans object to bringing in talent especially in emerging industrial sectors but acknowledged the need to balance these against the goal of strengthening the Singapore core.

In a nuanced lived reality, she said negative sentiments prevail because of workplace issues where Singaporeans see foreign peers getting more opportunities than the former feel they deserve. The Fair Consideration Framework is thus in place to make sure Singaporeans are not short-changed, and added that the authorities would take any information about discrimination against Singaporean workers seriously. She called on fellow Singaporeans to remain open and inclusive, and highlighted that as a multi-cultural society, many had foreigners as family members too.

Mr Louis Chua agreed with Ms Rahayu, observing that Singaporeans are not inherently xenophobic but said there is a need to build human capital and develop Singaporeans. He questioned if there was really a skills gap or shortage of local workers, and suggested that the government consider limited-term foreign work passes that the WP has raised in Parliament to address immediate needs.

Mr Francis Yuen also agreed that the country should welcome foreign talent where it is truly needed but ensure that there is a commitment to train local talent over the longer term. What is not acceptable is taking in foreign labour because it is cheaper. The challenge then is how to effect that skills and knowledge transfer to local workers? This would benefit from a carrot-and-stick approach he said, citing the Japanese Kanban and the General Electric Six Sigma approaches in emphasising to workers the drive to learning, improvement and excellence. He

also underlined the need for companies to keep morale high by demonstrating that they are willing to share the improved profits in this approach with labour.

Ms Rahayu added that such change was at the heart of the Industry Transformation Maps approach of that the government introduced but progress is sometimes hindered by inertia within companies. The government provides incentives with productivity grants and tax reductions. Also, she explained that when companies ask for employment pass concessions, the Ministry of Manpower urges firms to look to local talent first.

Political Contestation of Ideas: Minimum Wages

Using the recent debate on minimum wages as an example, Dr Gillian Koh asked if the panellists believed that there is value in the contestation of ideas.

Ms Rahayu said there is the need to draw on facts and to be constructive in one's approach to uphold the "Singaporean way" of managing policy debates. WP's Mr Chua responded by agreeing with a fact-based, evidence-driven approach, and emphasised that this would be enhanced if there were access to relevant information from the government. A freedom of information act would facilitate higher quality policy debate and the crowdsourcing of ideas from the public and academic community. Mr Yuen agreed with this.

Ms Rahayu added that while the government is open to more debate and discussion it is important to ensure this does not lead to a polarisation of views as has occurred elsewhere.

Future of the Parties

To a question from the audience about who the next face of the PSP will be after its Secretary-General Dr Tan Cheng Bock, and whether women would be given a greater leadership role in his party, Mr Yuen said the party is actively building up not one leader but a broad bench of leaders to take the party forward. This is evidenced by its choice of NCMPs but also the leadership in its youth and women wings.

Taking on the same question, Mr Chua said that the WP views leadership succession as a journey rather than a destination. He said that his Secretary-General's appointment as the LO appointment was something to build on.

Vision for Singapore

Rounding up the discussion, the party representatives responded to one final question from the audience: what is their party's vision for Singapore?

Mr Yuen said the PSP hoped for a more compassionate society, and one where success is not measured by material standards alone. He highlighted the need for more equitable sharing of the fruits of our success. He said that as the economy faces competition from China and other countries in Southeast Asia, the need for blue ocean ideas is ever more urgent. As for the PSP itself, its aspiration is to become "the party of choice" rather than just one that receives protest votes against the PAP.

Mr Chua said the WP wants to enable Singaporeans to achieve their dreams regardless of background but needs to find levers to do so. He noted that Singapore's place in the global economy can seem precarious but local firms need the dynamism to compete. He said that change would begin with the nature of the debates in Parliament.

PAP's Ms Rahayu said the PAP government aims for meaningful and constructive debates for the betterment of the people. The COVID pandemic has been a big test of its ability to do that but hopefully, Singapore would emerge stronger out of it.

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