

Lee's legacy starts to change with the times

Singapore's dominant People's Action Party facing its strongest electoral challenge

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The prime minister is admitting mistakes and even apologising. It's a sign that the political party that has dominated Singapore and told the island state what's best for half a century could be facing its strongest electoral challenge.

The People's Action Party (PAP), with the son of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew at the helm, is still expected to win tomorrow's parliamentary election and remain in power for at least the next decade.

But more seats are being contested than ever before - 82 out of 87 - by a new crop of well-educated opposition candidates. They face an uphill challenge, though. Since 1968, the PAP has held over 90 per cent of the seats in parliament, effectively making Singapore a virtual one-party state, with all the trappings of democracy.

Analysts are divided over the reasons for the de facto one-party rule.

"The political success of the PAP is based on simultaneously repressing opponents and delivering substantial economic transformations. Neither one, by itself, could have enabled the PAP to enjoy power for four decades," Professor Garry Rodan, from Australia's Murdoch University, said.

The PAP could not have maintained such parliamentary dominance if it had not delivered the goods, senior research fellow Gillian Koh, from Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, said. "Its legitimacy is completely based on performance and integrity."

The PAP has delivered huge economic growth, with the nation's per capita GDP soaring from US\$2,251 in 1960 to US\$28,765 in 2009. The party's Housing Development Board programme enabled over 80 per cent of Singaporeans to live in affordable government housing.

"Despite all our success, despite everything we have achieved, there is an unsettled mood among our people. There are people who are angry," Community Development, Youth and Sport Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan told the newspaper Today.

One difficulty the opposition parties face is that all domestic media are partly government-owned.

But a gradual opening up of traditional media alongside unfettered internet debate has meant an increasingly substantial discussion of campaign issues, such as immigration and housing costs.

"The opposition in the past was not able to recruit because there was a very strong climate of fear for a very long time," Koh said. "The situation today is very different. We've seen a liberalisation of the political space."

In a nod to the rising frustration among voters, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave a rare apology this week. "We made a mistake when we let [suspected terrorist] Mas Selamat run away. We made a mistake when Orchard Road got flooded," Lee told a rally on Tuesday. "And there are other mistakes which we've made. We're sorry we didn't get it exactly right."

The ruling party's dominance extends as far back as 1959, when Singapore held its first general elections for a fully elected parliament.

The PAP won 43 out of 51 seats, enabling Lee Kuan Yew to become prime minister.

"The PAP was backed by the strongest trade unions on the island, led by Lim Chin Siong and others. They were the best organised political party," Singaporean constitutional law scholar Kevin Tan said.

In 1961, the Barisan Socialis, a left-leaning splinter party that included party co-founder Lim, split from the PAP, leaving it just a one-seat majority. In 1963, the PAP launched Operation Cold Store, under which Singapore's Internal Security Department arrested several Barisan members, including Lim.

"They got rid of their most serious rivals through Operation Cold Store," Tan said.

In the 1963 general election, Barisan won 13 seats, while the PAP won 37 of the 51 seats. One Barisan member of parliament, Chia Thye Poh, was arrested without trial in 1965 and only released in 1998, making him one of the longest-serving political detainees in history.

If Lim, Chia and other Barisan politicians were not arrested, they would have been a formidable opposition, Tan said.

A semblance of an opposition later emerged in 1981, when Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, the secretary general of the Workers' Party, won a by-election. Since 1981, the opposition has held fewer than a handful of the seats in parliament.

Two months after Jeyaretnam's re-election in 1984, he and Workers' Party chairman Wong Hong Toy were charged with misreporting party accounts. Jeyaretnam was jailed and fined, which disqualified him from running for parliament for five years.

Jeyaretnam contested the 1997 general elections and lost. Shortly afterwards, several Singapore leaders including Lee Kuan Yew and then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong filed defamation lawsuits against Jeyaretnam, who was subsequently ordered to pay S\$20,000 in damages. The damages were raised to S\$100,000 after Goh appealed.

"The PAP has used defamation suits resulting in astronomical fines for opponents such as Jeyaretnam to serve as an example to anyone who might dare to robustly debate and scrutinise PAP institutions and practices," Rodan said.

Despite the defamation lawsuits and restrictions on free speech about race and religion, Singapore is hardly an international pariah. It's a staunch ally of the US, has close ties to China's leadership and has helped facilitate regional integration.

"Singapore's great virtue is that they have been able to skirt this fine line between democracy and autocracy, having the mechanics of democracy without the substance, but it's worked," Australian National University political scientist Benjamin Reilly said.

Singapore writer Catherine Lim said there was no question the PAP had brought stability and prosperity to the island nation. "But as the people have got more educated and sophisticated, they have begun to question the authoritarian style of the PAP, which has created a climate of fear and takes a stern stand against political dissent," she said.