

## **Singapore election: the PAP's order and stability will win out, but how will the opposition shape up?**

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Even while we do not know when the Singapore elections will be called and how the opposition will perform, we can identify a few givens as well as a few known unknowns.

I will start by highlighting three relatively stable factors that are unlikely to change in the coming election.

First, the opposition is not a government in waiting. Furthermore, that's not what most voters expect from them. They function as a potential check on the ruling party, a means for citizens to exert pressure on the People's Action Party (PAP) government.

In this sense, Singapore is fundamentally different from full two-party or multiparty systems where elections are about political parties vying for their turn to rule.

Instead, we have a dominant party system with the PAP entrenched as the party of government, while opposition parties reflect Singaporeans' desire to impose a certain level of accountability on that government. That's not going to change in 2020.

The dominant party context helps explain why most voters don't expect the opposition to have fully formed platforms with detailed policy proposals. The PAP understandably finds this very frustrating. It has criticised such voting behaviour as irresponsible, and wanting "opposition for opposition's sake".

Nevertheless, many voters will continue to use their vote as a way to deliver a desired level of check and balance, rather than to decide who should govern Singapore, which for now is a non-issue.

So, although every election is a guessing game, most of the speculation is simply about exactly what level of accountability Singaporeans seek during a particular election cycle.

We have seen the opposition make surges that spark speculation about whether we are on track for a 1.5-party system, only to have the electorate course correct and vote more conservatively in the following election. Clearly, the electorate wants some opposition. But either too much or too little makes the public nervous.

As a way to break through this cyclical pattern, the opposition has been trying to sell the idea that voters need to deny the PAP the supermajority of two-thirds of parliamentary seats. This would allow the opposition to block constitutional changes. But there is no evidence that this clarion call has been particularly effective.

The second given is that the opposition parties will not form any grand coalition. Minor parties may team up, but the big ones won't. At most, they will enter into electoral pacts to avoid three-cornered fights.

I often hear Singaporeans lamenting the fractured state of the opposition. In Malaysia, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's Pakatan Harapan coalition ousted Barisan Nasional in 2018, some argued that Singapore's opposition would make headway if it were similarly united. These Singaporeans think disunity explains the opposition's lack of success.

But this is a fallacy. Opposition disunity is a reflection of voters' own lack of consensus about the kind of political competition they want. Different voters are attracted to different types of opposition. Therefore, there is no single proven formula for satisfying hard core opposition voters while at the same time attracting swing voters, first-time voters, and PAP voters who may be tempted to defect.

To put it simply, it is unclear whether the opposition's best bet is to position itself as a radical alternative to the ruling party, or a sort of PAP Lite.

A party that differentiates itself sharply from the PAP, by promising free health care for example, will no doubt appeal to some voters, but will also alienate many others who might see such promises as fiscally unrealistic. On the other hand, a PAP Lite party that only promises tweaks at the margins will, similarly, not be able to please all potential opposition voters.

Singaporeans also have different views about the style of politics they want. Some prefer their opposition MPs to speak in measured and reasonable tones, others want a bolder, more confrontational approach that shows they will be able to get the better of ministers in parliamentary debates.

This is a dilemma that is not unique to Singapore. The same dynamic is visible in the Democratic Party in the United States and Labour in Britain. When you are in the opposition, do you move to the centre or do you move further left?

It would be foolish to underestimate the complexity of this decision. And so we shouldn't be surprised to see Singapore's opposition parties divided over how to go about their business.

The Workers' Party (WP) is the most successful opposition party of the past 25 years, so there is something to be said for its controlled and cautious approach – an approach that infuriates more impatient opposition supporters.

Low Thia Kiang, who had a 12-year stint as the WP's leader, has been very careful about whom he fields and about the causes he pushes. This is not surprising, seeing that he had a front-row seat when the PAP demolished the WP under Low's predecessor J.B. Jeyaretnam. Since Low took over, the party has made sure everyone is on message, and there are no loose cannons; they are almost as paranoid of the media as the PAP.

To Low's credit, over the years, he has shared the limelight with Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh, allowing them to grow in prominence as faces of the WP. But the WP clearly sees other opposition parties' candidates as potential liabilities to its brand, and thus it will resist forming coalitions.

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) has traditionally had a bolder and more distinct platform than the WP. But its lack of electoral success under Chee Soon Juan has been quite striking. Since its heyday in 1991, it has consistently performed worse than the opposition

average. But it is not clear if this is because of its platform, its style of politicking, or personality. It is possible the PAP did such an effective job of disparaging Chee Soon Juan that his party was rendered unelectable.

Yes, smaller parties are keenest to enter into a coalition. Four of them got together recently and said they were hoping for Progress Singapore Party (PSP) chief Tan Cheng Bock to lead them. I don't see this coalition improving these parties' chances.

The third constant is that the opposition will continue to benefit from the underdog advantage. Singapore voters may not have a great appetite for multiparty democracy, but they do have an innate sense of fair play. In their own lives, there are enough Singaporeans who feel the system favours privileged elites. So it is not surprising that they identify with candidates who seem to be victims of an overbearing government.

The opposition plays the underdog card well. And the government seems to know this. Although it won't create a completely level playing field by allowing electoral boundaries to be set by an independent election commission, for example, it knows it can't tilt the field to such an extent that elections lose legitimacy entirely.

This was why Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said elections needed to remain "contestable". The size of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) has been reduced over the past decade and more Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) created to ensure that smaller parties can continue to contest general elections.

Thanks to the underdog advantage, voters will give opposition candidates some leeway as long as they don't have some disqualifying deficits or make egregious mistakes.

The underdog advantage also means that attacks on the opposition may backfire if they are perceived as over the top.

The PAP must be hoping the government's allegations against the WP over its handling of finances will persuade voters that they can't be trusted to run town councils.

It is quite possible that the smears will not only be discounted by the public, but will also even fire up voters to lend their support to a beleaguered opposition. Remember how the WP raised S\$1 million (US\$740,000) in three days through a single online post. This is a sign the PAP cannot ignore.

Similarly, the recent string of Pofma (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act) interventions against opposition politicians may be intended to prove to Singaporeans that many opposition viewpoints are factually hollow, but they could instead add to the perception of unfairness, especially since Pofma only works in one direction: it cannot be used by opposition politicians to correct false statements made by the PAP government.

I would add the caveat that this underdog advantage doesn't always apply. If the opposition candidate is a non-starter, he's not going to milk any advantage from the PAP's attacks.

Another caveat: as the opposition appears to strengthen, Singaporeans will judge them by higher standards. This could help explain what happened during the 2015 campaign, when there was a narrative going around about an impending opposition surge – spread in part by

WhatsApp messages about bookies' odds, a subject I will return to later – resulting in voters being less prepared to give the opposition a break.

Next, let me turn to the “unknowns” – the new and less predictable factors in this election year. I can think of three of them.

First, who really has the upper hand in the online battle for hearts and minds?

For a long time, we have assumed that the untamed territory of cyberspace is ruled by opponents of the PAP.

But the ruling party and the government were not sitting idly by. Especially after the 2011 election, they joined the online battle with gusto. Government ministers and agencies developed a major official Facebook presence.

They have been supported by unofficial groups such as Fabrications against the PAP and Fabrications Led by Opposition Parties, as well as many named and anonymous keyboard warriors.

By the 2015 election, these efforts had a significant effect. Former Institute of Policy Studies scholar Tan Tarn How noted that we were seeing a “normalisation” of cyberspace. By this, he meant that Singapore's online space was beginning to resemble offline space – that is, largely middle-of-the-road opinions, with anti-government voices on the fringe. Just like in the real world, the government's voice was beginning to be among the loudest in the virtual world.

This shift is partly because the internet is no longer a minority preoccupation; it is now more reflective of the general public. Think of how Facebook used to be for cool young netizens, but now every uncle and auntie has an account.

But it is also because the PAP, like many governments in the world, have embraced the internet and social media.

The Oxford Internet Institute did an important study last year covering 70 countries, and found that governments and political parties were engaging in various forms of social media manipulation or disinformation. The methods ranged from using social media to shape public attitudes to using computational propaganda to suppress human rights, discredit political opponents and drown out dissenting opinions. Foreign governments have also been known to use similar tools to cause trouble in other polities.

The study did not cover Singapore, but it does remind us that internet tools are now at the disposal of all parties, governments included. And of course, since it's not cheap to use these tools at scale, governments with their superior resources can end up the big winners.

As an editor of a newspaper whose readership is mostly online, I know being competitive in that space is now big business. Data analytics will matter in this election like never before. The internet has become an arms race; money can make a difference.

In 2015, we already had a hint of how online rumours can sway voters.

You will remember how so-called bookies' predictions went viral on WhatsApp. These predictions said that the opposition, the WP in particular, would win at least four GRCs and

four SMCs. These could have been genuine, bona fide bookies' odds – in which case these bookies are probably out of business.

Or they could have been attempts to manipulate public opinion. Perhaps the opposition started these rumours to energise their supporters? But the consensus among observers like political scientist Bilveer Singh was that the rumours of a big swing towards the opposition helped the PAP. This may have given swing voters “cold feet”, Bilveer suggests.

That was 2015. The big question for 2020 is whether the government's massive investments in online platforms will make this the first election where the internet adds to rather than subtracts from the ruling party's already big offline advantage.

It is hard to answer this because we don't even know what's in the political parties' arsenal. We can follow their official accounts, but nobody is tracking whether parties can and do micro-target voters, or how they massage public opinion online, use trolls or fake accounts and so on.

I should also add that the online space remains fundamentally open, and no matter the resources dominant organisations pour into that space, there is only so much they can do to make their content go viral or to stop their opponents' content from going viral.

The second game-changer is the Tan Cheng Bock factor.

The major opposition parties have done well to attract more credible candidates, including individuals with resumes that would be considered a good catch even by the PAP – like Singapore Democratic Party chairman Paul Tambyah and the WP's Leon Perera.

There have also been defections from the establishment.

But Tan Cheng Bock's entry into opposition ranks is groundbreaking. Dr Tan was no ordinary backbencher; he was a trusted member of the PAP's Central Executive Committee.

The question is whether he will pave the way for others. I have met a number of Singaporeans who have achieved all they want to in their careers and now say they want to contribute to society. They feel Singapore needs to change radically, and not just cruise based on what has worked in the past. They are asking themselves: how can I best make a qualitative difference to Singapore? If they are establishment types, it may never have occurred to them to join the opposition. Until now. Will Tan Cheng Bock inspire more establishment elites to challenge PAP dominance? Of course, much depends on how he performs and wards off the inevitable verbal blows from the PAP.

One big obstacle for him is that many younger Singaporeans do not remember his days in parliament. They know him from the 2011 presidential election. And his critics believe he is driven by self-interest and by the conviction that he was robbed of the elected presidency. Tan Cheng Bock has cast himself as someone who wants to reclaim the old PAP. The question is whether there are enough people who can tell the difference between the old and the current.

Third is how economic and geopolitical conditions will influence voters.

In most countries, the state of the economy is the best predictor of elections. The greater the economic turbulence or uncertainty, the more people are likely to vote against the government of the day.

Singapore is different, because of the PAP's status as the natural party of government. Singaporeans have contradictory feelings towards the PAP. When times are bad, you may blame the PAP and yet you may treat the PAP as a safe haven. I think this is the inner conflict in the minds of swing voters especially.

It's like how the US dollar paradoxically holds firm or even strengthens when America's problems cause global turbulence. There is a flight to quality in the currency markets.

The PAP is the US dollar of electoral politics, making it quite hard to predict how its value will be affected by economic and geopolitical uncertainty.

On the one hand, the global pattern shows voters rejecting establishment politicians in these uncertain times. But for the PAP, the biggest-ever jump in its vote share occurred in the 2001 election, less than two months after the September 11 terror attacks.

In the coming election, the opposition may gain from slower economic growth. Or voters may heed the PAP call for order and stability at a time of leadership transition.

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