

Singapore: Year in Review 2009¹

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Introduction

2009 was a year of significant change as Singapore dealt with the impact of the worst economic crisis since Independence. In response, the government introduced several short-term measures to help Singaporeans cope with the impact of the crisis. The government also embarked on a review of the country's economic strategies and longer-term policy direction. This article reviews the implications of those measures. It also examines the changes to electoral rules and the use of new media in Singapore that were introduced in the year. We note the guiding principles that the government set out or referred to and record a selection of stakeholders' and public responses which we feel characterised the views on the ground and discuss the longer-term implications of the significant events and debates of the year.

1. Economic Crisis: Mitigation and Re-Examination

The economic figures released at the beginning of the year painted a picture of great uncertainty, but economic sentiment in Singapore and more generally Asia improved from the second half of the year.² Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 4.2% in the fourth quarter of 2008, dropped by 9.5% in the first quarter of 2009, decreased further by 3.3% in the second quarter of 2009 and rebounded in the third quarter of 2009 by 0.6%.³ In anticipation of the worst, the government projection for the overall growth figure for the year reached as low as -6% to -9% in April 2009.⁴ In October, however, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) projected that growth would range between -2.0 to -2.5%.⁵ In his New Year 2010 address, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong said that Singapore's growth rate for 2009 was likely to come in at negative 2.1%.⁶ There was still a great deal of uncertainty going into 2010 with leaders in the United States and Europe warning of a double-dip recession and events like the threatened default by Dubai World still unfolding in late 2009.⁷

Short-Term Mitigation Measures

The government was proactive and adaptive in arresting the effects of the global economic recession on Singapore. In fact, by November 2008, with the inklings of the severity of the economic disruption from news out of the United States, the government committed \$600 million to the launch of the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (SPUR) to help workers prepare for the downturn.⁸

The government implemented the massive \$20.5 billion Resilience Budget (introduced earlier than usual, in January). A sizeable portion of this Budget was aimed at job retention, and enhancements to SPUR for the benefit of the Professionals, Managers,

Executives and Technicians (PMETs) group that would be inordinately affected by the crisis. Also included was an innovative new scheme called Jobs Credit, a cash grant to employers to support the employment of Singapore citizens and permanent residents to reduce businesses' wage bill and keep workers in place.⁹ Jobs Credit, in particular, reveals the adaptiveness of the government in modifying its recession schemes. According to NTUC Chief and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Lim Swee Say, "In 1998, [the government]...cut CPF by 10 percentage points. Even so, 30,000 workers were retrenched"¹⁰. With the Jobs Credit scheme, workers' Central Provident Fund accumulations would not be affected and yet employers would still receive help in trimming costs in order to stay afloat before the world economy picked up steam again – a "win-win" solution with the government and public finances picking up the tab.

To help firms through the credit crunch, the government committed to guarantee "significant share of the risks of bank lending"¹¹ through Special Risk-Sharing Initiative (SRI) scheme.¹² Other measures included tax rebates, exemptions and incentives, the freezing of government fees and the encouragement of capability development with grant and training schemes.¹³

While there was pressure on the government to provide cash handouts to support consumption, or to cut Goods and Services Tax (GST) to do the same, it resisted such measures, arguing that much of the spare cash – up to 60% - would leak out of the country as Singapore imported almost everything it had.¹⁴ In addition, there would be unnecessary administrative costs from changing systems for a temporary reduction of GST.¹⁵ The preferred approach was to keep as many workers as possible in jobs with the Jobs Credit scheme,¹⁶ and for businesses to have access to enough funds to stay afloat in the crisis with the SRI. The onus was on stakeholders to play their part - on employers to keep their workers,¹⁷ on banks to continue to extend credit to viable companies, and on landlords to pass on property tax rebates to their tenants.¹⁸

For the first time, the government drew upon on the country's financial reserves to the tune of \$4.9 billion to fund some of these measures.¹⁹ The speed at which approval was obtained from the 'second key' in addition to Parliament, that is, the Elected President, raised concerns on whether due diligence had been served in the process.²⁰ Members of Parliament (MPs) Irene Ng and Inderjit Singh called for "more information on the process by which the decision was arrived at to tap the reserves"²¹. It was argued that "citizens who elect... the PAP government, and the President, deserve to know in more detail the justification for unlocking the reserves"²² and yet it was also recognised that "Singapore's system depend[s]...on trust in the individuals occupying positions like the [Council of Presidential Advisers]...and the elected presidency"²³.

Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and the President's Office were at pains to publicise the step-by-step process by which the decision to use the reserves was taken. This was a positive development in the evolution of the institution of the Elected President in the light of increasing demands for transparency and accountability in Singapore.

Longer Term Re-Examination

“After this crisis, the world is not going to be the same again. This is not just another cyclical downturn and recovery.”

*Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
Debate on President's Address, 2nd Session of 11th Parliament*

Like earlier economic crises, the latest global economic meltdown was capitalised upon to evaluate Singapore's economic direction. The government convened the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC)²⁴ comprising members from the private and public sectors and academia. The tasks of the ESC included “exploring new growth areas; anchoring global companies...[in Singapore]...and nurturing home-grown enterprises; attracting talent; creating high-value jobs for locals; and maximising resources such as land and energy.”²⁵ Certain areas of discussion, such as the possibility that growth and demand would come from the region nearer to Singapore rather than G3 countries demonstrates a willingness of the government to reconsider key economic paradigms. The ESC is scheduled to present its recommendations before Budget 2010.²⁶ It is also expected to feature a discussion of the exit strategies for the government's recession measures.

Calls have been made for a radical re-examination of Singapore's growth strategy. At the Singapore Economic Policy Forum in October 2009, Manu Bhaskaran, Vice-President of the Economic Society of Singapore, stated that Singapore had to “go beyond tweaking or fine-tuning”²⁷ in rethinking its growth model. He pointed to the necessity of “build[ing] resilience by diversifying both demand and production so as not to be as dependent on selected markets and multi-national companies”²⁸. At an ESC Industry Forum, in response to proposals from the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) on Finance and Trade and Industry to the ESC, Finance Minister and ESC Chairman Tharman Shanmugaratnam said he disagreed with a similar recommendation by another GPC to dampen volatility of the economy for more sustainable growth, but instead saw the way ahead as “keep[ing] the average high”²⁹ by going for a higher growth rate and preparing the business sector and workers to cope with the resulting volatility.³⁰ Of what could perhaps be a signal of the upcoming ESC recommendations, Mr Shanmugaratnam agreed however with the GPC's recommendation to look to developing “real depths of capabilities” or “ecosystems of excellence” in seven to eight core areas for the country.³¹

Economic commentators have also called on the government to increase its efforts to develop the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) sector. At the said Singapore Economic Policy Forum, Mr Bhaskaran commented that while Singapore had a robust presence of multi-national companies and government-linked companies, which had been positive for the country, Singapore lacked an adequately strong base of private local enterprises.³² Another grouse was of the difficulty that SMEs faced in obtaining adequate financing for expanding abroad in their fledgling years. To these, Mr Shanmugaratnam emphasised that the “aim shouldn't be to substitute for the market, but to catalyse and aid the market”³³.

The country's productivity levels, which had been on a downward trend for seven continuous quarters since the end of 2007 was highlighted as another area of concern.³⁴

The Singapore Competitiveness Report by the Asia Competitiveness Institute of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy identified dwindling productivity as “the most immediate challenge to deal with”³⁵ and recommended that efforts to increase productivity extend beyond the upgrading of worker’s skills. Companies, for instance, would have to “change the way they [conduct] ...business, redesign work processes and provide products and services with higher customer value”³⁶. While Jobs Credit “helped avert major job losses”³⁷, some pointed to the possibility that the scheme had brought about a decline in productivity as it “retards the re-allocation of human capital”³⁸. PM Lee announced at the NTUC Ordinary Delegates Conference that Jobs Credit would be extended till June 2010 and gradually phased out to eventually “give way to more targeted measures to support economic restructuring and boost productivity”³⁹. At the same event, NTUC Secretary General Lim Swee Say encouraged companies to increase productivity and improve competitiveness by becoming “cheaper, better and faster”⁴⁰.

Singapore’s approach of importing foreign labour was questioned for its impact on productivity. Singapore has seen a sharp rise in the influx of foreign labour in the past few years. Local national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, inferred that “almost 300,000 foreigners flocked here to take up jobs in the past two years”⁴¹, from official statistics which revealed that “of the 235,000 jobs added in 2007, six in 10 went to foreigners [and in 2008, foreign talent filled up]...seven in 10 of the 222,000 new jobs”⁴². MP Cedric Foo argued that the ease of access to foreign labour was a disincentive for companies to improve productivity.⁴³ Citigroup economist Kit Wei Zheng commented that “Singapore’s rapid growth had been mostly driven by a massive increase in the workforce...[b]ut it is clear that growth powered by importing foreign labour is simply not sustainable”⁴⁴. This strategy seemed unsustainable because it would create a dependency on cheap foreign labour⁴⁵ and also push down wages of local lower wage workers to exacerbate the income divide.⁴⁶ In response, Minister for Manpower Gan Kim Yong, warned that the reduction of the number of foreign workers was too simplistic a solution in terms of expecting direct and immediate increases to labour productivity.⁴⁷ Mr Gan further related that the regulation of foreign labour supply was a delicate policy balancing act between the demands of companies and the fears of resource competition from locals.⁴⁸ While the Prime Minister had said that the import of foreign labour would slow down⁴⁹, this move would have to be carefully managed to allow companies enough time to increase their productivity to cope with reduced supply of foreign labour. It also remains to be seen how this policy will be further calibrated as the government balances the interests of the business sector with that of the other social ramifications of the wage and integration challenges that arise from this.

How does this process of economic rethinking and re-evaluation affect the government’s social compact with the people of Singapore? It has been argued that legitimacy of the incumbent government has been built on years of high rates of economic growth and rapid development, in exchange for selected socio-political freedoms. The government’s handling of the economic crisis in terms of agility and ability to keep unemployment rates low and the management of expectations of negative growth rates has added to its credibility. The question is whether this social compact can be maintained over the longer term. As the Singapore economy matures, it is difficult to expect similar stunning rates of growth and development. The trade-offs in economic strategy as well as its social implications will become far more challenging.

2. Socio-political landscape: Evolution and Management

2009 also saw an increase in activism from the ground and civil society in Singapore. The trigger was partly the effects of the economic crisis and partly the actions of certain groups of Singaporeans with strong views on specific activities undertaken by the groups concerned. The government responded differently to each point of contention.

Foreign Talent

Apart from the impact of foreign labour on productivity and economic development, the influx of immigrant talent also generated significant public discussion on its social implications.

Local-foreign tensions were exacerbated with the economic crisis, which has brought about the perception of greater resource competition in areas including housing, employment and education from immigrants amongst some Singaporeans.⁵⁰ The situation has not been helped by the fact that the numbers of immigrants brought in has increased sharply in recent years. “As of June [2009]... the number of PRs rose by 11 percent over the previous year to hit a record high of 533,000. Other foreigners numbered 1.25 million”⁵¹. “From 2000 to [2008...], the number of citizens grew by 0.6 per cent annually, while that of PRs grew by 5.8 per cent. PRs have been growing at an average rate of almost 22,000 per annum, and they need a roof over their heads.”⁵² PM Lee however tried to clear the air by saying at the Nanyang Technological University Student Union Dialogue that Singapore “will not continue to admit people at this pace”⁵³, and only “permitted the surge to respond to this extraordinary opportunity”⁵⁴ of economic boom in the last few years.

The perception on the ground was that permanent residency and citizenship had been accorded too easily. This sentiment was thrown up in the controversy generated when a Singaporean PR and Chinese national, Ms Zhang Yuan Yuan was featured in the Chinese and local mass media for her participation in a military parade to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. This brought on accusations of disloyalty and devaluation of the Singapore PR status. The government sought to assure the public that it had been “careful about who becomes a citizen”⁵⁵, ensuring that those who were admitted would be those who could make a positive contribution to the country.

The government subsequently introduced measures to create a greater level of differentiation between citizens and foreigners.⁵⁶ For example, in December, it announced that the school fees paid by foreign students would be raised and that citizens would be given higher priority in the entry rules to local schools.⁵⁷ Other approaches proposed included making citizenship more attractive to PRs, and the provision of financial inducements, but not making them the key issue so that people would be attracted to Singapore for the right reasons.⁵⁸ In particular, Nominated MP Paulin Straughan emphasised that “the focus should remain on growing the pie even larger...so that there is enough to satisfy everyone”⁵⁹.

More importantly, in recognition of the multi-faceted challenge of ensuring that foreigners and locals live harmoniously with each other, the government established the

National Integration Council along with a \$10 million fund to design policies and programmes to foster integration. The guiding principle for integration was articulated as being a two-way street where the locals would have to do their best to accommodate the newcomers, and the foreigners would have to adopt and adapt to some of the local culture and practices.

Town Council Management Report

The economic crisis also affected the investment funds of the town councils. The revelation that the town councils had collectively lost S\$16 million resulted in vociferous calls by Singaporeans for the town councils and related government bodies to account for the losses.⁶⁰

The initial response of the government was to highlight that the town councils, like many savvy investors such as the Harvard Endowment Fund were affected by the crisis in kind, and that profits and losses should be viewed on a longer-term time horizon.⁶¹ Town councils, on their part emphasised the necessity of investing sinking funds to reduce the financial contribution of residents for large projects, and that the town councils had acted within the guidelines provided by the Ministry of National Development (MND).⁶²

The government also announced that town council management reports (TCMR) would be issued to gauge the performance of each town council. The released TCMR framework was aimed primarily at “build[ing] up the nexus between town councils and residents” in a marked return to the original function of town councils.⁶³ Indicators of the TCMR were, on top of evaluating town councils, a reflection of the efforts of residents too, especially in areas which include cleanliness. The message of active citizenship was re-emphasised in the announcement of the first TCMR for Tampines Town Council, where the results of the TCMR has been framed as a reflection of both the town council and its residents in the area of cleanliness.⁶⁴

The focus and categories of the TCMR framework stood at odds with the fact that it was launched at a time where town councils were being called to be more accountable with their investments. There was dissatisfaction on the ground on how the TCMR did not look into the investment of sinking funds, but instead only evaluated the financial health of town councils as one generic category. The government’s reason for this was that a report which featured complex indicators would be difficult for residents to assess⁶⁵ and that the TCMR was formulated based on feedback consisting of a panel of realtors, academics and government officials.⁶⁶ The MND assured the public that the framework “would be reviewed over time and expanded where necessary”⁶⁷. The hope is that the government would be responsive to comments from residents to fine-tune the report card, especially when it concerns the issue of being financially accountable.

A Rare Contest

The saga surrounding the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) was regarded as a watershed in civil society development in terms of the intensity of public debate that contrasts with the common perception that Singaporeans are politically apathetic.⁶⁸ Several Christian women joined AWARE and the Executive Committee (EXCO)

during the Annual General Meeting in late March due to concerns that the organisation was involved in the promotion of homosexuality, especially through a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Programme that it presented at local schools. Although these women were constitutionally elected into EXCO positions, their efforts, in combination with their subsequent actions and the reportage in the media, were seen were viewed by the old guard as a “takeover”⁶⁹.

The tussle between the old and new guards of AWARE became a very public episode, with both sides holding press conferences to tell their sides of the story. The new guard eventually stepped down following a successful vote of no confidence at an emotionally-charged Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM).⁷⁰

Some commented that this heated occurrence in civil society is unlikely to repeat itself, while others see this as a sign of an emerging and growing civil society.⁷¹ This event saw an intensive struggle over values in the public sphere, which may point towards possible future clashes between religious conservatives and the homosexual/liberals lobby as each seek to gain or defend space within the mainstream.⁷²

Throughout the entire episode, the political leadership mostly commented from the sidelines and refrained from public, direct intervention, stressing that the saga was “not a national dispute”⁷³ and that “it is for members to sort it out”⁷⁴ despite calls from the public to do so.⁷⁵ Early comments mostly consisted of reminders to be tolerant⁷⁶ and to “keep religion out of petty politics”⁷⁷, and of the importance of diverse representation of society’s interests and people in civil society groups.⁷⁸ Four days after the EGM, AWARE’s CSE programme was suspended by the Ministry of Education. This was done on the grounds that the guide was inappropriate in other aspects as “some suggested responses in the instructor guide [were]...explicit and inappropriate, and convey[ed] messages which could promote homosexuality or suggest approval of pre-marital sex” despite its meritorious qualities of containing accurate information on STIs and HIV.⁷⁹ Almost two weeks after the EGM, a press release detailing the government’s position on the saga was published. The press release reiterated the government’s view of Singapore: that it is a largely conservative society, and that homosexuals were entitled to live their lives within it. It also reiterated the need for “mutual respect and tolerance”⁸⁰ in Singapore’s multiracial and multi-religious landscape, and stated that a key rule of political engagement in the country was that of “keeping religion and politics separate”⁸¹. PM Lee repeated these points in his National Day Rally Speech on 16 August 2009.⁸²

The government’s considerable restraint in this episode stands in contrast with the very direct and public manner in which it intervened in other internal quarrels, such as the Airline Pilots Association-Singapore⁸³ (2003-2005) and the Chinese High sagas (1999)⁸⁴. What remains to be seen is if this is symptomatic of greater political liberalisation, or instead a reflection of the government’s policy of refraining from involvement or commentary and attempts to remain on neutral ground in the contest between the religious right and the homosexual lobby for greater public space. The effort to be seen as objective was reflected in Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng’s appeal to the media to “report on the issues, the groups and the personalities involved...dispassionately and impartially”.⁸⁵

PAP Convention 2009

The issue of political renewal took centre stage at the People's Action Party (PAP) Convention 2009. PAP Secretary General Lee Hsien Loong had identified some potential leaders. He also stated that more new candidates would be fielded in the next General Election.⁸⁶ Concerns over the rising costs of living and the ability of the middle class to cope with this increase were met with reassurances from Mr Lee, and a reiteration of measures that were already in place to deal with the worries.⁸⁷ The PAP Convention 2009 was also an event which witnessed the party's use of new media in an extensive manner for the first time.⁸⁸

Online responses to the event were mostly negative. Netizens expressed their frustration at government leadership, policies and measures which include the GST rate, increasing transport and electricity price and the influx of foreign talent.⁸⁹ In addition to making guesses at the line-up of PAP MPs and the date of the next general election, some netizens expressed that "no political party was indispensable to the country"⁹⁰, possibly in response to the remark that "this leadership for Singapore can only come from the PAP, and if the PAP lets Singapore down, we are all in big trouble, not only PAP but (also) Singapore. Therefore, the PAP must never let Singapore down; (we must) make sure when we press the button, things work."⁹¹

3. Legislative Amendments: Changing the Rules?

In 2009, the government made announcements on legislative amendments to bring about greater political liberalisation in Singapore. These relate to rules in the Film Act on party political films as well as to rules on a greater plurality of voices in Parliament. The proposal was to reduce the average size of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), increase the number of Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs), and make Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) a permanent feature in Parliament. Also introduced was a set of rules relating to political assembly via the Public Order Act.⁹² Towards the end of the year, the government also announced it would propose the introduction of a 'cooling-off' rule in the election laws.⁹³

Films Act

In January, the government eased restrictions on party political films⁹⁴ in the Films Act in its response to the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS) report. The AIMS committee studied the "implications of rapidly evolving new media technology on our society"⁹⁵ in making its recommendations. In effect, the legislative amendments to the Films Act do not newly define what a party political film is per se but rather allow certain categories of party political films to be disregarded as such with the creation of statutory exclusions. While a new Political Films Consultative Committee (PFCC) was created along with these changes to make recommendations to the censors, this committee only plays an advisory role and is still subject to the decision-making authority of the Board of Film Censors (BFC). This conclusion fell short of the recommendation of the AIMS committee to set up a decision-making body independent of the existing BFC for the rating of party political films. In addition, the BFC is still not required to detail its reasons for

the rejection or acceptance of party political films. Nominated MP Audrey Wong commented that “more access to information means people have more data and facts to judge for themselves [and]...might also send the signal to film-makers that it is safe to submit political films”⁹⁶.

To date, these new limits have been tested by film-maker Martyn See, who submitted two previously banned films under the new system. See’s film on opposition politician Chee Soon Juan *Singapore Rebel* was given the go-ahead by the BFC, while his film Zahari’s 17 years did not make the cut.⁹⁷ The full implications of these legislative amendments may only be seen in the next general election when “voters can expect to watch podcasts and vodcasts put out by political parties as part of their Internet election advertising”.⁹⁸ In addition, individuals, apart from political parties and their candidates, would also now be free to “participate in Internet election advertising’ by ‘blogging or posting election materials”⁹⁹.

These changes could be read in large part as a response to the 2006 general election. “A month before the 2006 polls, the Government made clear that political podcasts and vodcasts by candidates and political parties were not allowed during the elections...Blogs and websites which consistently espoused a certain political line were asked to register, and barred from posting political material online.”¹⁰⁰ This did not prevent some bloggers from doing so.¹⁰¹ Blogs such as Yawning Bread included commentaries of the 2006 elections.¹⁰² In addition, opposition members did not need to use official sites as blogs such as the Singapore Elections Rally Archive which contained voice recordings of election rallies in 2006.¹⁰³ The Internet was a medium of political expression for all but the incumbent government in the 2006 general election. The PAP made intensive use of new media for the first time in its 2009 Convention.¹⁰⁴ This is likely to continue in the next general election, judging from the expressed opinion of Senior Parliamentary Secretary of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Mr Teo Ser Luck who anticipates that cyberspace is “where the most intensive fights will be”¹⁰⁵.

The 2006 general election raised the question of whether political bloggers fell under the category of ‘the opposition’, in looking at their contributions to the political discourse during the period. Some pieces received a fair bit of attention. For instance, local bloggers Mr Brown and Mr Miyagi’s three-minute Bak Chor Mee podcast parodied the James Gomez episode¹⁰⁶ and “scored more than 100,000 downloads”¹⁰⁷ within days. From the perspective of blogging as an alternative form of journalism, bloggers should remain objective and neutral in their comments. However, bloggers could also be viewed as citizens who are simply making their views heard, just as a populace communicates opinions to the ruling government in a democracy. From this standpoint, a politically active blogosphere is symptomatic of agitation of this constituency for greater political liberalisation. It also remains to be seen where the politician-blogger line will be drawn in Singapore, and if Singapore will see its own blogger-turn-politician in the likes of Malaysia’s Jeff Ooi.¹⁰⁸

Changes to Electoral System

During the debate on the President’s Address of the second session of the 11th Parliament, PM Lee announced that certain changes would be made to the electoral system to make it “more balanced”¹⁰⁹. The proposed changes were the reduction of the average

size of GRCs from 5.4 to less than 5, fewer six member GRCs and a range of smaller GRCs, in addition to a minimum of 12 SMCs¹¹⁰ from its current number of nine.¹¹¹ The maximum number of Opposition Non-Constituency MPs would be increased from six to nine and the nine positions for Nominated MPs would become a permanent feature of Parliament.¹¹² PM Lee stated that these changes were made as “Singaporeans want national issues to be more fully debated, and they increasingly want to participate in this discussion, which is all to be encouraged.”¹¹³

On the face of it, the proposed changes are likely to intensify political contestation in future general elections. In particular, the changes regarding the GRCs and SMCs will translate to lower barriers of entry for opposition parties, as lesser candidates (and lesser fees) will be needed to contest a GRC. Opposition politicians will also be free to try their hand in other wards.¹¹⁴ Increased contestation may also occur in Parliament should the opposition make full use of the increased number of NCMP seats.¹¹⁵ The greater representation of opposition voices in Parliament, according to Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies is expected to cause the “PAP party line to become more visible [as PAP MPs will no longer]...have to be their own internal critics”¹¹⁶. The increased diversity of voices is likely to be an effective means of tapping on the collective wisdom of alternative voices in policy-making in an increasingly complex world. The question is also if these changes will have a larger impact on civic participation and the interest of Singaporeans in local politics. The hope is that the reduction in size of GRCs and increase in number of SMCs will improve the probability that Singapore citizens get to vote and feel that they would count more than ever.

Responses to the proposed changes have been divided. While the proposed changes regarding the GRCs and SMCs have been generally welcomed, some have called for these changes to be taken even further,¹¹⁷ for instance, for the decrease in the average GRC size from 5.4 to below 5 to go further. More debate and controversy has surrounded the proposed changes to the NCMP and NMP scheme. Some have offered the view that this could result in a Catch-22 situation for opposition politicians.¹¹⁸ PM Lee, in the same event said that the objective of institutionalising the NMP scheme and increasing of the number of NCMPs in Parliament is to “generate more robust debate and improve policy formulation, [to]...expose PAP MPs to the cut and thrust of debate, and demonstrate what the opposition can and cannot do.”¹¹⁹ Good performance by an NCMP in Parliament signalled that an opposition member was doing well as an NCMP, and that there would thus be no need for the local populace to vote him or her in. Historically, not one of the four NCMPs who have been in Parliament since the scheme was introduced in 1984 has managed to be successfully elected as a full-fledged Member of Parliament.¹²⁰ The NCMP scheme could also negatively impact the opposition in general, as Singaporeans may be disinclined to vote for opposition parties as their voices would already be represented in Parliament. Workers’ Party Chairman, Ms Sylvia Lim said that the changes would allot “greater recognition to the desire of voters who cast votes for the Opposition candidates in significant numbers who would otherwise be shut out in a pure first-past-the-post system”¹²¹.

Cooling-Off Period

Towards the end of the year, the possibility of a 24 hour cooling-off period prohibiting political campaigning (apart from party broadcasts on television) before polling day for both general and presidential elections was mooted. This proposal was made with the objective of giving Singaporeans “some time to calm down, reflect on the issues and the arguments, and analyse what’s at stake, logically, rationally”¹²² before casting their votes, and with the second reason of reducing the likelihood of public disorder.¹²³

This move was unanimously opposed by Singapore’s opposition parties. The Workers’ Party, for instance, felt that the incumbents could still continue its campaign efforts through the television “by disguising it as ‘news’ items from the Government”¹²⁴. On the ground, voters interviewed by *The Straits Times* felt the cooling-off period was unnecessary citing the pragmatic and less passionate approach of most Singaporeans towards elections as a key reason.¹²⁵

The question at this point is of the implementation of the cooling-off period and the extent to which campaigning would be prohibited. The scope of this restriction appears to apply to all forms of campaigning by political parties in general, but not to the party political broadcasts, usually aired on national television the day before polling day, and reporting by the mainstream news media.¹²⁶ The blogosphere appears to be unlikely to cease in its commentary of the general election, if comments by local blogger Seelan Palay (that his blog would “disregard cooling-off day election regulation”¹²⁷) are any indication to go by.

Public Order Act

The Public Order Act (POA) was passed in April ahead of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings. The aim of the POA was to create “a more effective framework which is formal, transparent and coherent for the management of public order by the Police”¹²⁸.

With the passing of the POA, the old regime under the Miscellaneous Offences Act (MOA) was repealed. There were two key differences between the POA and the MOA - first, the definition of public assembly and public procession has been changed. While, as raised by Sylvia Lim in Parliament, the MOA required an assembly or procession to consist of at least 5 persons, this numerical restriction has been removed in the POA.¹²⁹ Second, the POA gives the police a range of new powers to deal with participants of public assemblies and processions. These powers include the ‘move-on’ order, restrictions on filming where threats to security are believed to be posed, as well as the gazetting of specific events.¹³⁰ The first major use of the legislation was for the recently concluded APEC meetings - the first gazetted event under the POA.¹³¹

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether these rules will lead to a more open political arena. 2009 should be noted for the number of liberalising reforms and the rather high level of political activism on the ground over a range of issues. The level of trust of the government seemed to have moved up a notch because of its relatively responsive and effective measures to tackle the economic challenges.

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