



Reflections on the Singapore General Election 2011 (GE2011) 27 May 2011

Dr Tan Ern Ser
IPS Faculty Associate

Below is the adapted text of the remarks Dr Tan made as a speaker at “Singapore GE 2011: Understanding Voting and Political Engagement”, a lunchtime talk organised on 27 May 2011 by The Wee Kim Wee Centre, Singapore Management University (SMU).

An assessment

By now we have already heard all kinds of analyses, inferences, or conclusions both pre-GE and post-GE.

There seems to be a consensus that we have just had a watershed election. Some point to the 60% and 81 seats won by the People’s Action Party (PAP), a landslide by any standards, while a louder resonance heard is that the most successful opposition party has won six seats and even picked up two Non-Constituency Member of Parliament seats. Sounds like a case of half-empty or half-full, depending on one’s perspective.

Is this a watershed? When you start from a zero base, an increase by one seat is a watershed and breakthrough, such as when JB Jeyaratnam won the Anson seat in 1981, and following which, we have always had two or more opposition MPs in Parliament. By the same token, when the Workers’ Party won a Group Representation Constituency (GRC)—the first ever for an opposition party--on May 7, it did look like a watershed and breakthrough.

But from a longer term perspective, this event can only be deemed a watershed if it leads the way, however gradual, to a “more than one party” system in Parliament; otherwise, it would just be a bleep on the political landscape.

Whether or not this will turn out to be so depends to some extent on what the WP does with the beachhead it secured in Aljunied GRC (and Hougang Single Member Constituency), and whether this will result in an even better showing for the opposition in GE 2016. I am thinking statistically here: essentially, one needs at least two points to plot a path and extrapolate its future trajectory.

If it were merely bread and butter issues, and unhappiness with the PAP, which brought about that vote swing to the opposition, then a competent, responsive, revamped

government and a cooperative economic climate could entrench the one-party dominance system we still have.

However, if the motivating factors were about having effective alternative voices and checks and balances, then even a competent, responsive government could not reverse it so easily.

In short, do Singaporeans see the PAP Government's current revamp as reinforcing the need for an effective opposition to keep the government on its toes, or for having a strong, competent, yet compassionate government-- even if the latter means sticking with a one-party dominance system?

Were the 40% of voters migrating away from the PAP or migrating towards the opposition? Is the migration permanent or temporary? I reckon 30 per cent have migrated permanently, while the remaining 10% could be swing voters.

Voter Demographics

Apart from extrapolating into the future, I am also interested in the demographics of voters.

The middle class has been singled out as feeling squeezed by policies which benefit mainly the low-income. Who and what did they vote for really? Were they merely concerned about bread and butter issues, or did they have an effective opposition in mind?

What about the sandwiched generation, which I am insisting is not the same thing as middle class? To be both is a double whammy. What about young voters? What about first-time voters? What about new citizens?

Only a properly conducted survey—random, representative, decent response rate—which deals with these variables can answer the above questions. Hopefully, we can go beyond mere conjectures and hypotheses to derive some concrete, valid answers.

Response to the Merdeka Poll pre-election survey

The findings of an independent phone interview national poll conducted during the May 2011 GE campaign by Malaysian opinion research firm Merdeka Center are being presented today, to help us understand the concerns of the Singaporean electorate and how they voted in the election.

My response to the Merdeka Poll survey:

1. We need a robust random sample with a decent response rate.
2. We need to compare the survey results with that of GE 2011, whenever possible and appropriate.
3. Some survey results don't quite square with the GE results. For instance, 29 per cent thought the opposition credible and 66 per cent support the idea of having a stronger opposition in Parliament. What do these survey findings mean in the light of the outcome of GE 2011? That voters are pragmatic; were voting against the PAP, rather than for the opposition; or would opt for an opposition party, only if the latter put up a credible slate?

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so. © Copyright 2011 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.