

GE2020 results signal a return to the norm, or start of a new normal?

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The Straits Times, 19 July 2020

A general election called amid a pandemic and as a recession looms would normally be expected to result in a flight to safety and a surge in vote share for the ruling party. But the outcome of GE2020 held nine days ago confounded that.

A significant vote swing of 8.7 percentage points against the People's Action Party took its overall vote share to 61.2 per cent.

The PAP saw its vote share sink further in Workers' Party-held Aljunied GRC, and lost a second GRC, Sengkang, to the WP, which saw a record 10 MPs elected.

The ruling party's share of the national vote came as a surprise to many activists and observers.

Some called it the worst-ever election result - with 10 elected opposition constituency MPs - that had to be regarded as a disaster for the Government, as well as its fourth-generation leadership that has been playing a greater role in running the country and the election campaign.

However, a closer look at the swing and vote share nationwide going back to the 1970s suggests that GE2020 marks a return to the norm of the mid-1980s and 1990s, when the PAP got between 61 per cent and 65 per cent of the votes.

There was a swing back to this norm in GE2011, which some analysts described as the start of a "new normal" vote range for the PAP.

GE2015 upended that with a vote share of nearly 70 per cent.

The question is: Does GE2020 mark a return to the norm of the low-to mid-60s range, or might it be the start of a "new normal" where the PAP's vote share isn't a given and could even go below 60 per cent?

Insight looks at five factors.

Sharp swings in the past

The 8.7 percentage point swing is not the most significant downward dip in the ruling party's 61 years in power. That was in GE1972, which saw a 16.3 percentage point drop in the PAP's vote share to 70.4 per cent.

Granted, the election before that, in 1968, was an anomaly with the main opposition party, Barisan Sosialis, boycotting the election and only seven out of 58 seats contested.

And in the two elections after that 1972 result, the PAP managed to reverse the slide, getting 74.1 per cent and 77.7 per cent of the national vote in GE1976 and GE1980 respectively and ensuring a clean sweep of all the seats.

However, the roll-out of one controversial policy after another in 1984 - from steps to favour graduate mothers to a report that proposed raising the retirement age from 55 to 60, then 65 and consequently pushing back the age when people could withdraw their Central Provident Fund savings - caused significant disquiet.

As controversial was the introduction of the Non-Constituency MP scheme, which would guarantee a minimum of three opposition members should there be fewer than that number elected. Critics saw it as a salve to younger voters' wish for some opposition presence in the House to check the PAP.

These contributed to a 12.8 percentage point drop in the PAP's vote share in GE1984 to 64.8 per cent. For the first time since independence, the PAP lost two seats to the opposition in what was called a "watershed" election.

Mr J.B. Jeyaretnam of the Workers' Party retained Anson with 56.8 per cent of the votes, up from 51.9 per cent when he first won it in the 1981 by-election. And Mr Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Party won Potong Pasir with 60.3 per cent of the votes.

While the PAP retained 77 out of 79 seats (30 of them were walkovers), the disappointment on the faces of many of its leaders - used to clean sweeps - was palpable. A headline capturing the mood as votes were tallied read: "Night the winners felt like losers... while their opponents exulted in their gains".

That downward swing saw the candid admission by younger party leaders that the PAP's election strategy was wrong in a confidential post-mortem report on GE1984, made available to the authors of *Men In White*, a history of the party published in 2009.

The report said the party had to revamp its image, engage people emotionally, and stop harping on the quality of its candidates as this reinforced the perception that its super-achievers were too removed from the ground.

Crucially, it also said the PAP had to accept that "the opposition is here to stay" - and the party should try to maintain a large and stable majority rather than eliminate the opposition altogether.

That two-thirds ceiling

The stage for a 61.2 per cent vote share was set 36 years ago.

GE1984 marked the start of a new trend where the PAP would struggle to get more than two-thirds of all valid votes cast. This proved to be the case in seven out of nine general elections, including that year's.

Conversely, the opposition could generally be assured of getting at least one-third of the votes - provided it did the groundwork.

GE1988 and GE1991 saw further slides in the PAP's vote share to 63.2 per cent and 61 per cent.

One factor cited for the 1991 outcome was the by-election strategy adopted by the opposition to increase its vote share by contesting less than half of all seats, thereby returning the PAP to power on Nomination Day.

The thinking was this: Voters would be more willing to support the opposition as there is no danger of inadvertently voting the Government out of power. They could then have their cake and eat it - a PAP Government, as well as an opposition that would be a check and balance on the dominant ruling party.

The strategy seemed to work.

In Potong Pasir, Mr Chiam got a record high 69.6 per cent of the votes in GE1991, and the PAP lost three more seats - the WP's Mr Low Thia Kiang won Hougang with 52.8 per cent of the votes, the Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) Mr Ling How Doong won Bukit Gombak with 51.4 per cent of the votes, and the SDP's Mr Cheo Chai Chen won Nee Soon Central with 50.3 per cent of the votes.

But these wins were not irreversible.

Infighting within the SDP and mismanagement of estates by Mr Ling and Mr Cheo saw the PAP win back both their seats convincingly at the next election.

GE1997 also saw the PAP increase its vote share to a level above 1984 - 65 per cent - partly a nod to second prime minister Goh Chok Tong's more consultative style of governance. Improvements on the ground and linking priority in estate upgrading to the level of support for the PAP also played a part.

However, Hougang bucked the trend. Mr Low saw his share of the vote rise to 58 per cent, whereas in Potong Pasir, Mr Chiam's vote share slid to 55.2 per cent.

Mr Ling managed 28.4 per cent, while Mr Cheo got 38.7 per cent.

The elections of the 1980s and 1990s showed that the opposition could be assured of at least between 25 per cent and 30 per cent support.

And while the PAP could be assured of around 40 per cent, at best, under two-thirds of the electorate were prepared to give their backing.

Outliers in the 2000s

Two atypical elections within the last 20 years may have coloured expectations of what a strong mandate is.

GE2001, called in the wake of the Sept 11 terror attacks in the United States and in the middle of a global recession, saw a flight to safety, with voters giving the PAP 75.3 per cent of the votes. However, only 29 of the 84 seats were contested that year, with the WP contesting two.

The other unexpected result was GE2015, which followed a targeted effort by the Government to address hot-button issues in the wake of GE2011.

The surprising 69.9 per cent vote share that year has been pinned down to the feel-good effect of SG50 celebrations, and the death of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew giving many pause to reflect on the PAP and the role it played in keeping Singapore successful.

In a way, both high scores had energised an opposition seeking to deny the ruling party a clean sweep. The latest hustings saw various parties raise the spectre of a wipe-out of opposition constituency MPs, which helped swing undecided voters round.

The aftermath of GE2001 saw a reinvigorated opposition, with the WP under Mr Low's leadership and the SDP stepping up its walkabouts in constituencies they were targeting to contest, and coming up with policy proposals and a manifesto.

GE2006 was the first time in four elections that the PAP was not returned to power on Nomination Day, with 47 out of 84 seats contested.

Ahead of the May polls, former PAP chairman Tony Tan - who would go on to be President from 2011 to 2017 - said: "Normally we will get between 60 and 65 per cent and that will be a very good result."

When the votes were counted, the PAP's vote share was 66.6 per cent - above this range, but a downward swing of 8.7 percentage points nonetheless, and the same swing from GE2015 to GE2020.

Dr Tan noted that while the PAP Government's performance had put it in a favourable position with voters, "there's a mood for change in Singapore - which is not bad".

"Some people are restless, some of the younger people would like to see more competition, perhaps controversy and more exchange in Parliament. So this will be helpful to the opposition. But this is one part of an evolving society and we have to take the changes as they come."

GE2011 saw even greater contestation, as the opposition attempted to fight all 87 seats but did not manage to get the paperwork submitted in time to have a team stand in Tanjong Pagar GRC.

But a cocktail of grievances, including issues over housing, transport and immigration, in the lead-up to the general election saw the PAP get its lowest share of the popular vote since independence - 60.1 per cent - in the 82 contested seats, and the loss of Aljunied GRC to the WP.

The result was still - just - within the 60 per cent to 65 per cent range. But it saw the Government redouble efforts to address hot-button issues such as housing, transport and immigration, and engage citizens more widely - moves that helped explain the surge in support for it in GE2015.

A distinct groundswell

That 2015 surge in support, analysts believed, was not sustainable. But neither was the previous slide in support lasting.

The PAP's vote share in GE2020 - 61.2 per cent - is a whisker higher than that in GE1991, making it the third lowest to date.

The loss of a second GRC - on the back of greater support for the WP in Aljunied GRC and Hougang - is also significant. What should one make of the outcome?

The result is not unexpected, given the groundswell of anxiety and anger that emerged in the lead-up to GE2020 over the decision to call an election while the Covid-19 pandemic is still raging, as well as concerns over jobs and competition with immigrant PMETs, and the desire for checks and balances in Parliament.

Activists note that the sharpest swings in support away from the PAP took place in private housing estates where 20 per cent of the population live. Many dwellers are professionals facing disruption and competition for jobs, or who run small and medium-sized businesses that were badly hit by Covid-19.

Several single seats that were made up largely of HDB estates such as MacPherson, Radin Mas and Yuhua, in fact, saw the PAP get above 70 per cent of the votes - suggesting that heartland voters remained a key base of support.

In a lecture last Wednesday, veteran diplomat Chan Heng Chee noted that the electoral result was a vote on the last five years, the last five months and the last nine days.

Voters were looking at PAP predominance or the "super majority" and how governance and parliamentary debate had been conducted in the past term of government. They did not approve of the way the changes to the elected presidency and policies like the fake news law, officially called the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, or Pofma, were introduced.

As for the last five months, Professor Chan, who is the Institute of Policy Studies' S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore this year, said the vote was also on how the Covid-19 pandemic was handled, citing a lack of clarity and micromanaging of rules and protocols for businesses. There were also growing fears and anxieties about jobs.

And in the last nine days of the campaign, it was about messaging, communicating and the online presence and savviness of the parties.

Some would argue that the PAP has done well in retaining its share of the votes at a minimum of 60 per cent for 36 years, despite a much stronger opposition, a more questioning electorate, and a more challenging global environment.

Yet many activists and supporters are concerned about the 8.7 percentage point swing, perhaps with good reason.

One common view is that it could have been wider had the PAP not made late tactical deployments to its East Coast GRC and West Coast GRC slates.

While the East Coast PAP team led by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat - who moved from the safer seat of Tampines GRC - got 53.4 per cent of the votes, activists believe the GRC could have swung to the WP had it been helmed by another minister.

Likewise, the 51.68 per cent win by the West Coast PAP team led by Minister S. Iswaran against the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) team led by former PAP stalwart Tan Cheng Bock might have been slimmer were it not strengthened by a second minister, Mr Desmond Lee, who came over from Jurong GRC.

To set things in context, a further slide of 8.7 percentage points in the next election could see the loss of four GRCs - East Coast and Marine Parade, West Coast and Chua Chu Kang - and three SMCs: Bukit Panjang, Bukit Batok and Marymount.

That would see a total of 32 opposition MPs in Parliament, assuming the WP retains Aljunied, Sengkang and Hougang - enough to deny the PAP the two-thirds majority required to amend the Constitution.

It is a prospect that might alarm longstanding PAP activists and supporters, but one a growing number of voters appear willing to accept.

Tougher contests ahead

A look at the closest contests in GE2020 suggests that core support for the PAP in various constituencies has been on the decline, and may continue on this trajectory.

Traditionally, at least 40 per cent to 50 per cent of voters in a seat tend to back the PAP, with about 25 per cent to 30 per cent rooting for the opposition - though this can be higher if established parties like the WP are contesting.

The swing voters in the middle - many of whom tend to be younger but include middle-aged voters - were critical in the WP's winning Sengkang GRC, holding on to Aljunied GRC and Hougang by stronger margins, as well as in single seats such as Bukit Batok, Bukit Panjang and Marymount which saw sizeable swings away from the PAP.

The largest swing was in West Coast GRC, as large as 27 percentage points from GE2015. Seen against the GE2011 result, this is down to 15 percentage points.

Bukit Panjang SMC, where a popular backbencher new to the seat, Mr Liang Eng Hwa, was up against the SDP chairman, infectious diseases specialist Paul Tambyah, saw a 14 percentage point swing. This was whittled down to 12.5 percentage points when compared with the GE2011 result.

But the picture is not even across constituencies - and local factors could play a part.

Take the new Sengkang GRC, where the WP has been active on the ground and won a decisive 52.12 per cent of the votes against a PAP team with three office-holders, two of whom were fairly new to the area. The larger proportion of young voters, and the absence of a woman candidate on the PAP team - the WP team had two - likely affected the outcome.

Still, demography is not destiny.

Nearby Punggol West, with a similar demographic make-up to Sengkang, saw one-term MP Sun Xueling win 61 per cent of the votes against WP challenger Tan Chen Chen.

While Singapore's opposition party landscape is fragmented, three main players are expected to continue getting support from voters - the WP, PSP and SDP.

The WP and SDP have been doing regular outreach on the ground in seats they have contested in between elections, and the PSP has said it will do so, too. This is a strategy that increases their familiarity with voters and their concerns.

The question that arises is whether 61.2 per cent or thereabouts will become the new normal for the PAP's vote share in future, as the opposition entrenches itself?

Could GE2025 see a slide below 60 per cent, and to the mid-50s after that?

Much depends on whether the PAP can win the hearts and minds of voters all over again, the way it did in the early decades of Singapore's post-independence history.

After the slide of 1984, it took the PAP three elections to halt, then reverse, the trend of decline. This time round, the forces against it - a stronger, growing opposition and a changing electorate desiring greater political pluralism - appear stronger than before.

The WP, in particular, has seen a surge in popularity, winning more than 50 per cent of the votes on average in constituencies it contested for the first time, and has seen its appeal to young and middle-aged voters grow.

The move by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to officially designate WP chief Pritam Singh as Leader of the Opposition in Parliament is seen as a nod to the permanence of an elected opposition presence.

GE2020 saw an estimated 229,000 first-time voters, based on the number of people aged 20 to 24 as of June last year - about 8.6 per cent of the 2.65 million eligible voters.

Voters in their 20s and 30s make up about one-third of the electorate. As cohorts of millennials and younger voters become eligible to vote in future elections, their aspirations for more checks and balances in the political system could sway votes in close contests.

It remains to be seen whether such voters will switch parties as their life circumstances change.

"I expect our millennials will continue to support diverse voices and an opposition in Parliament as a good thing, even as they age," said Prof Chan. "The incumbent party will have to understand this group better to win back their vote."

But it has to also win back the votes of the middle-aged and middle-income residents it lost in GE2020, who will remain a core voting bloc for some time yet.

PAP activists have said that they start preparing for the next election right after the previous one.

As opposition party activists do the same, closer contests are expected to be more common at the next election.

From now till then, all parties will have to fight for every vote, make themselves known and liked, and engage and build trust with voters.