

Voters: Is a Freak Election Likely?

Tham Yuen-c

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On Nov 21, the People's Action Party will mark its 60th anniversary, after a record 55 years in power.

The Men in White - as the party is sometimes known, after adopting the white-on-white uniform to signal its corruption-free emphasis - has ruled continuously since Independence, transforming the country into a modern metropolis. Only one other democratically elected political party, Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, has been able to maintain a longer unbroken reign, of 71 years.

But the last General Election in 2011, when the PAP garnered its lowest winning vote share since Independence - 60.1 per cent - still looms large. As the PAP prepares to celebrate its 60th birthday, the big question is: Will it remain the dominant party?

The Singapore of today faces quite different challenges, compared with the issues of independence from colonial rule and sheer day-to-day survival that were paramount concerns when the PAP was formed back in 1954.

Some 1,500 men and women, locals chafing under post-war British rule, packed the Victoria Concert Hall on that momentous day to choose leaders for their fledgling party - one that went on to form the government in 1955 and that would guide the country through a series of crises in those early years. In 1965 came the greatest of these - Singapore was booted out of Malaysia.

It had become a country, and the PAP rose to the challenge of this landmark event - it has been in charge ever since, and confounded the doubters who thought that Singapore could not stand on its own two feet.

However, even though Singapore is now a financial powerhouse, and Singaporeans enjoy one of the highest GDP per capita rates in the world, it is not a time for the PAP to rest on its laurels.

A recent lecture on governance and politics by public intellectual Ho Kwon Ping had him pointing to historical trends elsewhere that suggest a potential election loss for the PAP. This, he predicted, would not happen in the next three elections, but could occur sometime well after that.

He sketched out three ways that the party could lose power: through an accidental or freak election that throws out the PAP; a split within the PAP because of internal differences; or an anticipated, outright loss, because of the loss of legitimacy and trust, for example, due to corruption.

factors that will determine the party's hold on power - the changing electorate, the need for it to remain dynamic, and the state of the opposition.

Among the scenarios Mr Ho Kwon Ping sketched for Singapore in the longer term - meaning sometime after three more elections - is the possibility of the ruling party being booted out because of a freak result.

This idea first reared its head 30 years ago, when founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew warned of the possibility that Singaporeans could get more than they wished for if they assumed the People's Action Party (PAP) would win, and so threw in a vote to the other side instead.

The party had just suffered a 12-percentage-point swing against it in the 1984 election - the biggest since it assumed power - and protest votes were thought to be the cause.

This was amid a confluence of unpopular policies, such as the raising of the Central Provident Fund (CPF) withdrawal age and a scheme that favoured graduate mothers having more children.

For years afterwards, the spectre of the PAP unwittingly being dumped by protest votes would be invoked.

It was to mitigate against such a possibility that the Elected Presidency was passed into law in 1991, to safeguard the country's reserves and the integrity of the public service.

But three decades on, the phrase "freak election" has surfaced among politicians, and voters are being cautioned against ignoring the possibility.

In sketching how the PAP might lose its dominance, Mr Ho singled this out as the most likely of three scenarios. The others: an internal party split; and a massive loss of confidence in the PAP, due perhaps to corruption, among other things.

He said Singapore's first-past-the-post Westminster system, where a party could control the House by winning just a simple majority of the votes cast, could lull PAP supporters into a false sense of security. If enough of them voted against the PAP to protest against the party or to check its power, it could result in an unintended loss of power.

Past voting patterns may be instructive: vote swings, both against and for the party, have averaged about 6 percentage points in the seven general elections since 1984.

Former Nominated MP and consultancy boss Viswa Sadasivan says: "If it was the case that a freak election could happen, then a lot more wards would have fallen in the last GE, because the ground sentiment leading up to it was extremely low and antipathy towards the PAP was extremely high. But contrary to predictions of many GRCs falling, they didn't."

He thinks past voting behaviour has shown that Singaporeans are rational, pragmatic voters who will pick a party that can best preserve their interests.

While there are protest votes, National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser observes that voters are discerning of the quality of opposition candidates they go for, and will cast their votes for those they see as credible.

Nevertheless, this is something the PAP worries about, says NUS political scientist Reuben Wong, adding that it is mathematically not that unimaginable.

Election results consistently show that a third of voters are staunch PAP supporters, another third are opposition supporters, and the last third are swing voters. So the PAP can lose its dominance with just 18 per cent of the undecided group voting against the party, says Dr Wong.

With the PAP winning by lower vote margins, such freak results also become easier to achieve, he adds.

As well as at the 1984 GE, there have been other exceptions to the small swings: In 2001, the PAP enjoyed a swing of 10.3 percentage points in its favour. This was attributed to a flight to quality, where people wanted security in the aftermath of the Sept 11 terror attacks in the United States and a consequent global economic slowdown.

Says NUS sociologist and former NMP Paulin Straughan: "If there's uncertainty, especially in the realm we have very little control over, Singaporeans will take less risk, and will lean on PAP for stability. It's like their security blanket."

In the 2011 election, the PAP had 60.1 per cent of the valid votes, down from 66.6 per cent.

GRC votes generally reflect the overall vote margin.

All things being equal, in the next general election, a slide of just 6.5 percentage points could potentially tip East Coast and Marine Parade Group Representation Constituencies - the two worst-performing PAP-held GRCs in 2011 - into opposition hands.

Ten parliamentary seats could change hands as a result.

But theoretically for this to happen, the electorate would have to be as unhappy as it was in 2011.

This could happen if the PAP fumbles and gets policies wrong, or loses touch with the ground, or becomes indifferent or insensitive to the demands of voters.

PAP ON ITS TOES

A Straits Times survey earlier this year, however, showed that the ruling party's shifts in social policy have boosted Singaporeans' confidence in its handling of housing, ageing, the poor and health-care issues.

Analysts agree that 2011 gave the party a wake-up call, and, in the past few years, it has gone on a "correction course", addressing woes in property prices and public transport services. So, the party is on its toes, and more prepared now than before.

Says Dr Tan: "The PAP will do whatever it can and adopt policies which it considers sustainable to stay in power, and hopes Singaporeans understand the trade-offs."

The ground today is a lot sweeter, adds Mr Sadasivan.

The question is whether the lesson learnt is permanent.

Says Mr Sadasivan: "There's a difference between making the change because they see the light, or because of survival."

So can a 1984 outcome happen again? Pundits generally agree that it is not likely in the next 10 to 15 years.

Dr Tan reckons that with issues such as an ageing population on the horizon, voters will also choose the PAP, which is a "known quality", by default.

Also, the 2011 election may also have awakened complacent PAP supporters from their slumber.

"It may have shocked the ones who were riding on the security that the PAP would always win. So I don't think elections in future will necessarily keep going in the direction of 2011," says Dr Straughan.

She adds that if the PAP keeps up with the momentum gained since 2011, and keeps its communication channels open, the next election "will not be such a big shock".

FREAK OR TREND?

For the protest-vote factor to come into play, the PAP would have to come up with a spectacularly unpopular policy. Or, as Mr Ho said in his speech, corruption becomes rife and the party loses legitimacy.

Even if the PAP loses power because of such a result, it might be viewed as a freak result for the party, but not for voters, who would have voiced their unhappiness in different ways to the ruling party well ahead.

Says Dr Wong: "We've been fed with so much propaganda about freak elections, so to speak, that we tend to think of the PAP losing a constituency as a freak. But a lot of outside observers might consider it a trend, and not a freak."

NUS political scientist Bilveer Singh agrees. Noting that the people have consistently voted for the Workers' Party in Hougang since 1991, for example, he says this shows people do want a WP MP.

"I think this logic (of the freak election) no longer applies as it insults the electorate of today and tomorrow," he says.

The bottom line: Freak elections may well happen. But most observers concur that they are unlikely, going by past precedents, even in this changed climate.

The PAP will, in all likelihood, have to grapple with a slide in popularity over several terms, such that if it does come to pass that it loses, it will not be an entirely wildly unexpected scenario.

BY THE DECADES

1954: The PAP is formed. 1955: In the Legislative Assembly elections, it wins three of the four seats it contests, with an 8.7 per cent vote share, to become an opposition party, with

the Labour Front forming the government. 1959: The PAP wins 43 of 51 seats it contests, and a 54.1 per cent vote share. Leads Singapore in full internal self-government. 1960s

1963: Just days after Singapore merges with Malaysia - causing tension within the PAP - a snap election sees the PAP just holding power with 46.9 per cent of the vote share. It loses 14 seats it contests, mostly to leftist Barisan Sosialis, but holds on to 37. 1968: First election after Independence. PAP wins all 58 seats; vote share is 86.7 per cent. 1970s

1972: It wins all 65 seats, with 70.4 per cent of the vote share. 1976: Again, all 69 seats, with 74.1 per cent of the vote share. 1980s

1980: All 75 seats, 77.7 per cent of vote share. 1984: Loses two seats to the opposition, retaining 77. Its vote share drops almost 13 percentage points to 64.8 per cent. 1988: Wins 80 out of 81 seats, but vote share, at 63.2 per cent, continues to dip. 1990s

1991: Mr Goh Chok Tong's first election as Prime Minister. Seeking a fresh mandate, he calls a snap election, but PAP loses an unprecedented four seats, retaining 77. Vote share drops to record low of 61 per cent. 1997: PAP takes back a few seats, after the main opposition then, the Singapore Democratic Party, faces internal strife. It wins 81 of 83 seats, with a 65 per cent vote share. 2000s

2001: Scores 75.3 per cent of the vote share, its third-highest result since 1959. Wins 82 out of 84 seats, amid terrorism and recession fears after 9/11. 2006: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong leads his first election. The PAP's vote majorities are reduced islandwide, and it fails to regain the two non-PAP constituencies. It wins 82 seats out of 84. Vote share is 66.6 per cent. 2010s

2011: A watershed - the PAP loses a GRC, one anchored by popular minister George Yeo. It has 81 seats out of 87. Vote share, at 60.1 per cent, is the lowest since Independence. 2013: Punggol East by-election, after the PAP's Michael Palmer resigns following an extramarital affair. PAP gets only 43.7 per cent of the vote, with the Workers' Party's Lee Li Lian scoring 54.5 per cent, and the seat.

yuenc@sph.com.sg