

What would be a 'good' win for PAP?

Janice Heng

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The ruling party has asked voters to give it a strong mandate. Insight runs the numbers on what that might entail

In the last general election in 2011, the People's Action Party (PAP) faced a maelstrom of discontent on issues ranging from immigration to housing to transport, leading to a record low vote-share of 60.1 per cent and the loss of six seats.

But after a flurry of policy changes that followed, the turbulence seems to have abated.

The PAP is now framing the upcoming election as a chance for voters to endorse or reject its direction in the last decade since Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took the helm. PM Lee has also said that an election in this SG50 year is also about how Singapore can continue to remain special in the next 50 years, and getting younger leaders in place who can help ensure this.

What would actually count as this "strong mandate" which they are seeking?

With the ruling party expected to be buoyed by SG50 jubilation and by the lingering sentiment from the outpouring of mourning over founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's death in March - would anything short of a huge rebound in voter endorsement be disappointing?

Or in the brave "new normal" that was so eagerly talked about after the last election, will simply maintaining the status quo be reason enough for celebration?

IN SEARCH OF A STRONG MANDATE

In candidate introductions over the past few weeks, PAP ministers have repeatedly called for voters to give them a "strong mandate".

This would be both acknowledgement of the PAP's past efforts and approval of its current and future direction towards an "inclusive society" with stronger social safety nets.

The Government started in this direction some years before the 2011 GE and has continued since, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the introduction of the Jurong GRC team.

"Our efforts are working but there are many years left in this," said Mr Tharman. "We hope that we get the support of the people for us to continue on this path, recognising the work and the progress that's been made, but also the work undone which we want to see done in the years to come."

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong echoed that call in Marine Parade GRC, saying: "If the Government doesn't get a good support, you're repudiating what they have been doing."

In many other countries, what is usually at stake in a general election is simply the chance to form the government. Winning the election is mandate enough.

But given the PAP's historical dominance, electoral victory is all but assured. Even as GE 2015 looks set to be the first since independence to see all seats contested, the largest opposition party is not fielding enough candidates to deny the PAP a two-thirds majority, notes National University of Singapore (NUS) East Asia Institute fellow Lam Peng Er. "So this election is not about replacing the PAP as a ruling party."

The challenge for the PAP is that, willy nilly, to be seen as doing well, it has to do better than simply win.

As NUS associate professor Tan Ern Ser puts it: "It is not about passing the exam with just 51 per cent, or barely scrapping through, but getting a convincing grade."

The size of its winning margin and the number of seats it concedes to the opposition have become the criteria by which the PAP's success is measured by most observers.

Thus, while winning 81 out of 87 seats with a vote share of 60.1 per cent would be hailed as a landslide by international standards, it was cause for deep soul-searching in 2011.

Yet although many Cabinet members have made the call for a clear mandate, no one has defined it.

Asked if 60 per cent - close to the 2011 result of 60.1 per cent - would suffice, Mr Goh would only say: "We never fix a percentage, because you will know when you see it, you see."

A FRIENDLIER CLIMATE

Looking at 2015 alone, the odds might seem in the PAP's favour.

The public outpouring of emotion upon Mr Lee Kuan Yew's death, so strong that it took even the Government by surprise, suggests the possibility of lingering goodwill and gratitude among voters.

Singapore's 50th birthday might similarly have encouraged voters to dwell on the progress of the past half-century. Or, at least, jubilee celebrations could make for a cheery, rather than critical, public mood.

Taking a medium-term view, policy areas that were flashpoints in 2011 seem to have cooled.

In housing, for instance, a backlog of demand for public flats has been cleared and the runaway resale market has been reined in.

On immigration, complaints are now more likely to come from employers feeling the pressure of tight foreign labour policy.

The Government has also introduced goodies such as the Pioneer Generation Package, a bundle of healthcare benefits given to all Singaporeans born in 1949 or earlier, regardless of income or housing type.

A huge step for a government more used to means-testing, it may soothe the feelings of older private property owners who felt left out of the usual largesse, said Mr Goh.

The Workers' Party (WP) has even made the Government's improved policies part of its campaign message, arguing that its presence in Parliament has made the Government listen more.

Announcing earlier this month that current WP MPs would stay in their seats, WP chief Low Thia Khian told reporters: "I want to continue to serve residents of Aljunied GRC... I'm very happy that their support has resulted in a better and more responsive government."

In this milder political climate, some analysts think that a convincing victory requires a vote share of around 65 per cent. Says NUS political scientist Hussin Mutalib: "The PAP, as government, has rolled out quite an unprecedented array of goodies and incentives for the last two to three years, not counting capitalising on Mr Lee's passing, SG50 celebrations, et cetera."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh takes the 2006 General Election as her benchmark, the first under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

"A strong mandate will take the PAP back to the first mark for Mr Lee, which was 66 per cent. A very strong mandate will take the PAP past that first mark."

But vote share also depends on the number of seats contested and GE2015 is set to be the first since independence to see a fight in every constituency on the electoral map. In years when the stronger opposition parties concentrate their firepower in GRCs where support for the PAP is weaker, that can drag down the PAP's winning margin, if no other swing factors are at play.

Even though the PAP's vote share is invested with much significance, it actually depends on political circumstances and may be difficult to interpret as there are mixed signals being sent.

TO CONTAIN OR REGAIN?

The vote share is one thing. When it comes to the number of seats the PAP will win, estimates are more conservative.

"There is some sense that overall we may do slightly better but, at the individual seat level, it may not be so good," says PAP activist John Ting.

The WP enters this election defending seven seats. Five of them lie in Aljunied GRC, which made history in 2011 as the first group representation constituency (GRC) wrested from the PAP.

"The general perception is that there's no way for the PAP to recapture Aljunied," says Prof Hussin.

If the national vote share is convincing enough, failing to regain Aljunied GRC will not affect the PAP's claim to a mandate. Conversely, winning it back "even by the slimmest of margins" will be cause for celebration, says Prof Hussin.

If anything, there are worries that more GRCs could fall to the WP, say some party activists. This was the talk after 2011, with many observers seeing the WP as being on the upswing, and much talk of more GRCs being within its sights.

Dr Lam agrees, saying: "It is not unthinkable for the PAP to retain around 60 per cent of the vote share but still lose East Coast GRC and Bukit Batok SMC." The latter is where PAP MP David Ong is contesting in a single-seat ward for the first time

He sees the PAP as seeking simply "to contain the WP to Aljunied GRC and a few SMCs, and to prevent the WP from breaking out from its few strongholds in the east".

But given the PAP's constant criticism of lapses in the WP-run Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC), if the WP were to prevail again in Aljunied and with a higher margin, that would count as a triumph for the WP while a significantly reduced majority would be a negative for the opposition party.

Prof Tan believes "it matters a lot to the PAP in that if, despite the AHPETC saga, which it deems to be an integrity and competence issue, the WP manages to be re-elected, then it suggests that the WP 'aura' has grown stronger, rather than diminished".

While much significance is attached to every seat the PAP loses, the ruling party has weathered losses in the past and pushed on with the direction of its national policies. In 1991, for instance, it lost four seats but regained two of them at the next polls in 1997 - all part of the ebb and flow of politics.

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

If the WP's allure is growing, it might be part of the post-2011 new normal, with greater calls for opposition representation and younger cohorts who seem more open to voting against the PAP.

"If we take that as a starting point, that Singaporeans believe it is healthy to have some opposition voice in Parliament and that it makes the PAP even more responsive to their needs, then... voters may feel that the country can afford a few more opposition voices," says Dr Koh.

For Dr Lam, simply doing no worse would be an achievement: "Retaining 60 per cent can be interpreted as a solid victory for the PAP, given the fact that younger voters are becoming a larger component of the electorate, and they tend to be more pluralistic in their values, have non-material aspirations and are harder to woo."

Retiring PAP MP Inderjit Singh, who is not contesting this election after having been in politics since 1997, agrees.

On the one hand are the improvements the PAP has made and the goodwill-generating circumstances of 2015; on the other, "the general trend around the world and the sentiments of younger voters, their aspirations for more voices in Parliament", he says.

That is why, even as the mood among party activists is one of "cautious optimism", expectations are tempered, he adds. "Every branch sees their battle as a tough battle. No one's taking it lightly."

So what would be a good performance? "A few points above the last round," he says.

"I think status quo and above should be considered a victory."

During candidate introductions these past few weeks, PAP ministers have repeatedly called for voters to give them a "strong mandate" as an acknowledgement of the PAP's past efforts and approval of its current and future direction towards an "inclusive society" with stronger social safety nets.