

Will there be a vote swing against the PAP?

Given the array of hot issues, competition in 82 out of 87 seats and a much better crop of opposition candidates, most people expect a vote swing against the ruling party come Polling Day. Will its vote share drop by 2, 5 or 10 percentage points? Insight discusses a range of possible election outcomes.

Zakir Hussain

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Last week, several Cabinet ministers acknowledged what had been on the minds of many in and out of the ruling party: the ground was not as sweet as it was ahead of the last general election.

Although Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong refused to be drawn into speculation about the People's Action Party's (PAP's) prospects at the polls, he did say he thought '66 per cent is a very high number', referring to the 66.6 per cent of valid votes that the party scored in 2006.

'There are more issues which are not completely settled this time,' he noted, citing the rising cost of living and the buoyant property market, which some have blamed for putting Housing Board (HDB) homes out of the reach of many young couples.

Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said last week that the 'ground is not as sweet' as it was in 2006. 'I don't think people are angry. That is not my sense. But 2006, it was a lot sweeter.'

Asked by reporters if the ground was not sweet, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said: 'The ground may not be sweet. But can you sweeten the ground by having more opposition in Parliament?'

It has been pointed out that the coming election will be the first since 1991 that voters will head to the polls with inflation at a high level. In the first three months of this year, inflation hit 5 per cent.

Ahead of the 1991 election, it stood at 4 per cent. The PAP saw a 2.2 percentage point downward swing that year and lost four seats to the opposition. Its share of the popular vote also hit 61 per cent, the lowest since Independence.

The party has turned in better scores since then, with the 1997 and 2006 polls held amid relative plenty and low inflation. Party leaders see the 2001 polls, in which the PAP got a record 75.3 per cent, as an exception as it was held after the Sept 11 terrorist attacks in New York.

Come May 7, will the PAP breach its post-Independence low of 61 per cent? Or will it hover above this mark?

For the record, the PAP scored an average of 66 per cent in the last six elections (see chart).

The biggest swing against the PAP came in 1984, when its share of the vote plunged 12.9 percentage points. That election saw hot issues such as a scheme that favoured graduate mothers having more children, and proposals to raise the retirement age from 55 to 60, while pushing back the age when people could withdraw their Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings.

Expect a swing

If the views of eight political analysts are any indication, it is very unlikely that the PAP will improve on its 2006 vote share.

They expect a swing of votes away from the ruling party for a number of reasons.

As conventional wisdom goes, a core 30 to 40 per cent of voters are solidly pro-PAP with another core 25 to 35 per cent pro-opposition nationwide. The votes of the broad middle group - ranging from 25 to 45 per cent - will therefore determine the outcome.

This group is commonly described as swing voters. Political observer Derek da Cunha calls it the 'wavering middle ground' who generally prefer stability but are open and receptive to voting for opposition candidates.

The record 2.2 million voters this year is nearly double the figure in 2006. No accurate breakdown of first-time voters is available, given the preponderance of walkovers in previous polls, but more than one in four - or some 600,000 voters - are between the ages of 21 and 35.

It remains to be seen how they will cast their ballots in a year when a record 82 out of 87 seats are being contested, nearly half of which saw walkovers at the last election. Many voters have also not voted in as many as 20 years.

They are a sizeable group and it is hard to predict how they might vote.

Statistically, the widespread contest this year should result in an erosion of votes for the ruling party, according to political watcher and former Nominated MP (NMP) Viswa Sadasivan.

More significantly, opposition parties have been able to attract high-quality candidates and project a better image.

As Mr Viswa notes, the ruling party is finding it hard to appease voters on highly emotional and controversial issues, such as ministerial pay, the income divide, the rising cost of living and high HDB flat prices.

'Collectively, this is an albatross around the PAP's neck which the opposition appears determined to make the best of. For the first time, these issues seem to resonate on the ground, bridging class and age divides,' he says.

He also cites 'a palpable feeling of frustration on the ground that the ruling party is not listening enough'.

His view is shared by other observers, as well as activists from both the PAP and opposition camps who have been walking the ground over the past year. But some note that even though a rise in the ruling party's vote share is remote, it cannot be ruled out completely.

Associate Professor Hussin Mutalib of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Political Science Department believes that the tide could turn in the PAP's favour if the unexpected happens.

For instance, new and shocking revelations of misdemeanours of certain opposition candidates could gain votes for the party.

Political commentator and former NMP Siew Kum Hong thinks the only circumstances in which the vote share might increase would be if there is a significant crisis before May 7, such as a terrorist attack or a meltdown of the global financial markets. This would, he says, cause a 'flight to confidence' towards the PAP.

Barring such unlikely incidents, however, they raise a range of probable outcomes that could happen next Saturday. They note that the PAP can have a higher vote share and yet lose a Group Representation Constituency (GRC), or have a lower vote share but sweep all 87 seats.

Drop to 61-63 per cent?

A 3 to 5 percentage point dip in the PAP's vote share - that is the probability broached by Singapore Management University (SMU) law academic Eugene Tan.

By acknowledging that the ground is not sweet, he notes, party leaders are 'not only moderating its expectations but also seeking to galvanise the undecided voters who may be more inclined towards the PAP'.

But with many more contests this year, political blogger Alex Au points out, the party's nationwide average may dip only slightly - if not lifted - by its relatively higher score in constituencies with a weak opposition party or less popular slate of candidates.

This was reflected in the 2006 election when a PAP candidate like Dr Teo Ho Pin in Bukit Panjang scored 77.2 per cent against Mr Ling How Doong from the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP).

This significant deviation means that the opposition vote share in constituencies like Ang Mo Kio GRC, where a hastily assembled Reform Party team introduced on the morning of Nomination Day was fielded, is likely to be lower and affect the national average.

Will it go below 61 per cent?

PAP's vote share dives to about 60 per cent - a 5 to 6 percentage point swing from 2006. This is yet another possibility because of the groundswell of discontent over hot-button issues, say some observers.

Prof Hussin suggests this could happen with several plausible outcomes.

One, the opposition wins one to two Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) and one to two GRCs. Two, the opposition fails to win a single seat, with Hougang and Potong Pasir going to the PAP. Three, the opposition wins just one SMC.

He estimates that the large group of 'undecided' or swing voters who make up their minds only after the nine-day campaigning period could be in the region of 25 to 30 per cent.

But this group could swing in the PAP's favour, he says, if it uses tactics - as it did in elections past - to discredit if not damage the standing of strong individual opposition candidates and their parties.

There is, of course, the counter-view of some observers that such tactics, if dragged out, could work the other way and backfire against the PAP. They cited the attack against then-Workers' Party (WP) Aljunied GRC candidate James Gomez in the 2006 polls.

Just last week, Holland-Bukit Timah GRC minister Vivian Balakrishnan drew attention to a video which he said suggested one of his SDP opponents had a 'gay agenda'. It drew a backlash online and offline. Both sides are letting the matter rest.

Says Mr Siew: 'For instance, if the PAP had persisted with its smear tactics against (SDP candidate) Vincent Wijesingha, then they are likely to alienate a lot of voters.'

In his view, the likely range of votes for the PAP would be 57 to 62 per cent, a 5 to 10 percentage point drop from 2006. He sees the opposition winning, at best, just Potong Pasir and Hougang, as well as Aljunied GRC.

Could it go even lower?

One observer who predicts a sharper drop in the PAP's vote share is Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the NUS Sociology Department.

His guess: It could hit 55 per cent.

However, he notes that the slide will be ameliorated by people who want a steady hand even as they desire a stronger opposition voice.

The low vote share could still translate into the PAP losing just one SMC, or one SMC and one GRC. If at all, that is.

Prof Tan shares the view of most watchers that the drop 'would probably not be enough to change the profile of Parliament significantly'.

That the ruling party's vote share has no correlation with the number of seats won has to do with the first-past-the-post system.

Under this practice, even if all candidates from the same party get 50.1 per cent of the vote in all constituencies in straight contests, they would take up all the seats in Parliament.

In the 1963 election, 18 of the 37 PAP legislative assemblymen elected received less than 50 per cent of valid votes in their own seats, most of which saw multi-cornered fights involving Barisan Sosialis and other parties.

The PAP's overall share of valid votes was 46.9 per cent. It was more than enough to ensure it a comfortable majority of the 51 seats.

Where party matters

Tempting as it may be to see elections as a referendum on the performance of the ruling party, voters tend to be discerning about who they vote for and whether they should plump for the PAP or for the opposition party contesting their area.

Hence, observers note that the extent of a drop in support for the PAP will be determined more by the party standing there, rather than the quality of its wannabe MPs.

Furthermore, in a GRC, the party brand tends to matter first, whereas in an SMC, the quality of the candidates tends to matter as much as the party's reputation.

As the WP is seen as the leading, and most credible, opposition party, a WP team standing in a constituency is thus likely to gain a bigger swing there than a team from another party.

This is why Mr Siew thinks the PAP will get a higher share of the vote in Ang Mo Kio GRC against the RP team than the 66.1 per cent it scored in 2006 against a WP team which stood there.

'In both cases, the opposition team was not particularly strong, but in 2006 it was the WP,' he notes.

In a recent seminar, Dr da Cunha went even further to give the WP - which is contesting four GRCs and four SMCs - an 8 to 10 per cent premium in votes over the next opposition party, with the exception perhaps of Mr Chiam See Tong's Singapore People's Party (SPP).

A third party, the National Solidarity Party (NSP), is also seen as a strong contender because, like the first two, it courts the broad middle ground where the other opposition parties tend to be viewed as outliers.

On the other hand, the PAP brand often matters a great deal. Says Dr da Cunha: 'Even if the PAP were to lower the bar for one of its candidates to such an extent that the bar is virtually buried in the sand, the candidate may well coast home on the basis of the strength of the PAP ticket.'

And constituency matters too

If bigger is better when it comes to parties, the converse is true for constituencies.

A smaller electoral division means greater vote swings from one party to another are more likely, especially in the case of a straight fight between two candidates of more or less equal calibre, says Dr da Cunha.

It is hence possible, albeit difficult, to achieve a 6 to 10 percentage point swing in an SMC of around 30,000 voters, he notes.

'Percentages in small electoral divisions do not matter so much because you are dealing with relatively small numbers of voters in absolute terms,' he tells Insight.

'The task becomes much harder in larger electoral divisions, such as a GRC with 100,000 or more voters.'

Mr Au has made the same observation, noting that SMCs allow for a greater diversity of outcomes.

The experience of past elections bears this out. In 1980, Mr Chiam See Tong got 41 per cent of the vote (3,821 votes) in Potong Pasir, losing to PAP incumbent Howe Yoon Chong, who got 5,509 votes.

But in 1984, Mr Chiam won 60.3 per cent of the vote (10,128 votes) against then-PAP newcomer Mah Bow Tan, who got 6,674 votes.

It mirrored the 12.9 percentage point slide in the PAP's vote share in that election. However, only two opposition MPs were elected then.

In Nee Soon Central, significant swings went both ways over three polls.

In 1988, PAP candidate Ng Pock Too won a comfortable 57.6 per cent of the vote (13,396 votes) against the SDP's Cheo Chai Chen's 38.5 per cent (8,944 votes) in a three-way fight in Nee Soon Central. The winning margin was 4,452 votes.

But in 1991, Mr Cheo defeated Mr Ng with 50.3 per cent of the vote (12,709 votes) in a straight fight. The margin: 168 votes.

In 1997, the PAP's Ong Ah Heng won 61.3 per cent of the vote against Mr Cheo. The margin: 5,623 votes.

Such volatility too reflected the dip in the PAP's vote share in 1991, and the uptick it enjoyed in 1997, even if these SMC results had little impact on the overall swing in vote share.

GRC swings as a whole are harder to track because of the expansion of GRCs - from three MPs in 1988 to four MPs in 1991 and five- and six-MPs in 1997, and because many of them have not been contested in several elections.

The campaign period counts too

The clearest indicator of how big the swing might be lies in the days ahead.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies believes that in wards where opposition parties have fielded their A teams, which way the vote swings will depend on how the parties play their game over the next few days.

Mr Siew agrees, saying developments over the campaign period will have a significant influence on the swing in vote share.

'A lot of this will depend on the PAP, because the PAP does set the agenda for the campaign to a large extent,' he says.

The unpredictability of the coming days is why Mr Viswa is not comfortable making forecasts on the size of the vote swing against the PAP or the number of seats opposition parties will gain. 'It is too early in the hustings to predict the magnitude of this,' he says.

As Dr da Cunha puts it: 'It is worthwhile remembering the old adage that a week in politics is a long time.'

'In a nine-day election campaign, sentiment among middle ground voters moving towards or away from a particular party could shift on a daily basis. The situation is therefore quite fluid, and we should expect the possibility of one or two surprises.'

Mr Au, however, takes a different view, saying: 'I don't think nine days of campaigning will change the splits much, considering they have remained fairly stable for years.'

Tipping point?

What would be the tipping point that would nudge voters to think hard about who they would mark a cross against, in what Dr Koh describes as 'an election of choice and competition' with several strong opposition teams?

Mr Viswa identifies 'a sense of comfort among the electorate that the worst of the economic downturn is over, which is likely to provide comfort for many to vote with their heart instead of their head'.

He says: 'In this climate, the argument that society will benefit from not just having more alternative voices in Parliament but for these voices to serve as a check on the Government, is likely to have enhanced appeal.'

At the same time, he notes that the ruling party is 'finding it hard to match up to the expectations of excellence in governance and standards that it has inadvertently created in the electorate - the classic problem of managing success'.

For others, the tipping point would be the tone the PAP takes in the days to come.

SMU's Mr Tan says: 'If the PAP campaigns in a dignified manner and is able to concentrate the electorate's minds on its election agenda, there will be dividends at the ballot box.'

Will voters take into consideration estate renewal plans and property values? Will they be persuaded by the PAP's message that its entire slate is the best team for the country - and its various constituencies?

Whatever the outcome, the PAP still has a lot going in its favour.

Mr Siew notes that a good number, if not most, of those voting for the opposition do not want a change in government.

What they want is a significant opposition presence in Parliament so as to get the PAP to be more accountable and to change its style.

He says: 'I don't think they would want an outright change in government, at least not today. In 10 years' time though, who knows?'