

The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2017

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Contents

Introduction	2
POLICY DEVELOPMENTS.....	2
Budget.....	2
Committee on the Future Economy	3
National Day Rally 2017	6
2017 Presidential Election	8
Other Changes to the Elected Presidency System	9
Pre-School Education and Kindergartens.....	10
Car and Motorcycle Growth Rate Freeze.....	10
SMRT Train Issues.....	11
SkillsFuture Scam	12
POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS	12
Cabinet Reshuffle, Speaker of Parliament, and PAP Leadership Renewal	12
The WP's 60 th Anniversary and Announcement About Leadership Renewal	13
Renaming of Syonan Gallery.....	14
Oxley Road Dispute.....	14
Jolovan Wham – Activism and Court Action	18
FOREIGN RELATIONS	19
Relations with China and the Terrex Incident.....	19
Expulsion of Foreign Agent.....	20
Diplomatic Relations and ASEAN	20
References	22

Introduction

This document provides a review of key developments in public policy and governance, changes in the political landscape and civic activism in Singapore, in 2017.

Advanced estimates of the country's economic performance that year, published by the Ministry of Trade and Industry in January 2018 put its gross domestic product (GDP) growth for 2017 at 3.5% (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2018). The annual average unemployment rate in 2017 was 2.2%, up from 2016's 2.1%, with the resident unemployment rate at 3.1% (Ministry of Manpower, 2017).

Singapore's Gini Coefficient, a measure of income inequality, was 0.459, and after government transfers and taxes, it was 0.401, the same as this was in 2016. Median monthly income for employed households increased to \$9,023 in 2017, up from \$8,846 in 2016, a 1.5% rise in real terms. (Department of Statistics, 2018)

Singapore's citizen population grew by 1% and the non-resident population declined by 1.6%; with the total population at 5.61 million (Strategy Group, 2017).

POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Budget

On February 20, Minister of Finance Heng Swee Keat proposed the national budget for the financial year of 2017 which was passed on March 2 after the parliamentary debate on it. The budget comprised two segments – the economic measures and the social ones.

The economic measures were targeted at evening-out performance across different sectors of the economy -- helping sectors that were doing well build on their success and supporting firms and sectors that were facing cyclical weaknesses with targeted measures. (Heng, 2017).

Some of the measures to support sectors facing challenging conditions were: the deferring of foreign worker levy hikes for specific industries such as Marine and Process-Engineering, the speeding-up of \$700 million in public sector projects to help the Construction sector; the raising of corporate income tax rebates; the formation of a \$600 million International Partnership Fund managed by Temasek Holdings to help local businesses scale-up and internationalise; the establishment of a Global Innovation Alliance to help Singaporeans get overseas work experience, build business networks and collaborate with international counterparts; the introduction of a \$80 million fund for small and medium-sized enterprises to adopt digital technology, tap advanced machine tools for prototyping and testing and raise productivity (Williams, 2017) (Au Yong, 2017).

Social measures came in various forms, such as those that deal with environmental sustainability. It was announced that water charges would be raised by 30% in two stages, first in July 2017 then in July 2018, to better reflect the cost of producing water. Carbon taxes would be introduced in 2019 after consultation with businesses: the government expected a carbon tax of between \$10 - \$20 a tonne targeted at "upstream" emitters such as power stations, not electricity users. Diesel powered vehicles would be taxed \$0.10 a litre for diesel, moving away from an annual tax on their vehicles, and a new Vehicular Emissions Scheme that targeted multiple pollutants would take over from a previous scheme that targeted carbon emitting vehicles in a bid to "nudge car-buyers" towards more environmentally friendly vehicles (Heng, 2017)

It was announced that couples who are first-time homebuyers will receive an increased CPF Housing Grant of between \$40,000 to \$50,000, depending on the size of the flat they are purchasing; and that they would also be able to use it to buy a resale flat, where previously they could not. There would also be an increase in the provision of centre-based infant care capacity, from 4000 to 8000, as well as enhanced bursaries for those attending post-secondary educational institutions. There will be a permanent increase in GST voucher of between \$40 and \$120, depending on housing type, as well as an income tax rebate of up to \$500 (Au-Yong, 2017a).

There were also measures targeted at strengthening community bonds and disability support. The government announced that it would spend an additional \$160 million over the next five years to support the work of volunteer welfare organisations especially those that address dementia and mental health issues. Training programmes would be extended to Special Education students, and a Disability Caregiver Support Centre would be established to provide caregiver training and peer support (Ministry of Finance, 2017).

Reaction

The topic that dominated public reaction to the Budget Speech was the hike in water prices – the question focused on the timing of the change and whether sufficient measures had been taken to prepare Singaporeans for it.

Opposition Workers' Party (WP) Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Leon Perera said that while the WP recognised “the positive moves made in Budget 2017,” the party questioned the timing and the justification for some of the measures and wondered “whether more can be done to support the beleaguered economy” through bolder policies in “local enterprise development, risk-pooling and education (Ong, 2017). He pointed to various price increases over the past years for petrol, parking fees, electricity, and then the price of water, and stated his belief that the timing was political in nature. He alleged that the People's Action Party (PAP) government had a tendency of “racking up a surplus in the early part of the parliamentary term and then incur deficit spending towards the end of the term close to the General Election” (Ong, 2017). Other WP NCMPs Dennis Tan and Daniel Goh urged the government to do more to strengthen safety nets for middle income households given the rise in cost of living.

In response to the reactions to the price hike for water, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli said in Parliament that while the Public Utilities Board would continue to plan and build the necessary infrastructure “it is only through right pricing that we can have everyone valuing water as a strategic resource and consciously conserving it (Chai, 2017).” He further noted that all the cost of producing clean water and demand for it had been rising, and that Singapore faced high water stress. Hence, the price of water had to reflect its scarcity -- the “long-run marginal cost” of producing it. He characterised the unhappiness arising from the announcement to be a sign that Singaporeans had grown complacent on the issue of water (Chan F. , 2017). Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing commented that the water issue had been left off “the national psyche for too long”, and this was reflected in the intensity of the debate on the subject.

Committee on the Future Economy

On February 9, the Committee on the Future Economy (CFE) released its report -- a year after it was formed. The 109-page document was the result of studying “global trends” and re-examining “Singapore's operating assumptions and model” and sought to chart Singapore's “next phase of growth” to “remain competitive and relevant in the world.” (Committee on the Future Economy, 2017b)

The CFE consisted of 30 members from various Singaporean industries and was co-chaired by Minister of Finance Heng Swee Keat, and Minister of Trade and Industry (Industry) S Iswaran, who took responsibility for the CFE after Heng suffered a stroke in May 2016. Minister Iswaran was initially deputy chairman, with Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing taking his place as deputy chairman. In addition to the main committee, there were subcommittees that delved into specific issues such as youth entrepreneurship. In total, the CFE report stated that it drew on views from "9,000 stakeholders, including Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs), public agencies, unions, companies, executives, workers, academics, educators and students" (Committee on the Future Economy, 2017a).

The CFE report recommended seven strategies: deepen and diversify Singapore's international connections; acquire and utilise skills; strengthen enterprise capabilities to innovate and scale-up; build strong digital capabilities; develop a vibrant and connected city of opportunity; develop and implement Industrial Transformation Maps; and partner one another to enable innovation and growth. The target of these recommendations is economic growth of between 2 and 3 percent which would exceed the performance of most advanced economies and offer Singaporeans sustainable wage growth and meaningful careers. (Committee on the Future Economy, 2017b)

The government accepted the CFE's recommendations in full, adopting measures to achieve the strategies such as committing \$80 million to help small and medium enterprises build digital capabilities, and a \$600 million new International Partnership Fund to help Singaporean firms scale-up and internationalise, introduced in Budget 2017 (Heng, 2017).

The Budget also contained measures to help Singaporeans build contacts overseas and find opportunities; attract overseas firms to link up with Singaporean partners to "co-innovate, test new products in Singapore, and expand in the region"; fund the training and up-skilling of Singaporeans, and provided the continuation of schemes meant to help workers stay employed such as the Wage Credit Scheme (Ministry of Finance, 2017).

Response

Reactions to the CFE's recommendations were generally positive, but as Chairman of the Singapore Business Federation SS Teo noted, the CFE had to deal with "a more developed Singapore with its own unique challenges for which there are no well-proven models to emulate". Instead of providing a detailed roadmap for the future development of the Singapore economy as some in the business community might have expected, the CFE provided a broad-based framework for future opportunities which was then up to businesses to work together to seize (Teo S. S., 2017).

A notable critic was businessman and former PAP MP Inderjit Singh, who said that the report had "no major new radical ideas that can greatly contribute to the transformation of the economy which we greatly need", and that the government remained "in a state of denial about the worrying state of the economy." His belief was that the "government's policies need to be changed significantly in certain areas" so that the economy can achieve long-term sustainable growth. He added that the recommendations of the CFE had to be followed by successful implementation, the lack of which meant that previous rounds of economic planning had been less impactful than they ought to have been the case (Singh I. , 2017).

Impending Tax Hike

During his 2018 budget speech, Minister of Finance Heng Swee Keat said: "Domestically, we also face rising expenditures over the longer term, as we invest more in healthcare and

infrastructure. We will have to raise revenues through new taxes or raise tax rates.” This was on the back of income tax increases that had been introduced in previous years (Heng, 2017).

The subject of a future tax hike was reiterated at the PAP’s annual convention on November 19 by Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong (Lee H. L., 2017d) when he said that it was “not a matter of whether, but a matter of when” that it should happen. Going further, he said, “well before the time comes, we have to plan ahead, explain to Singaporeans what the money is needed for, and how the money we earn and we spend, will benefit everyone young and old.” He said this was in response to increased need for government spending and investments to develop Singapore’s economy and infrastructure, and to improve social services and safety nets (Lee H. L., 2017d).

The comments in November precipitated a debate in mass media on the timing and nature of these tax increases, with observers in the private sector and academia such as CIMB economist Song Seng Wun suggesting that the “straightforward” choice would be a rise in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) (Chia Y. M., 2017). Some compared Singapore’s GST rate to that of other countries in the region, saying that Singapore’s rate of 7 percent was lower than the average which was 10 percent and that it had not changed for 10 years which made it the most likely candidate for adjustment. Chris Woo, of PricewaterhouseCoopers was among several commentators who ruminated on what the government might raise that would be politically palatable and yet effective at generating significant amounts of revenue said that GST was one of the “more efficient means” of tax collection (Cheng K. , 2017b) Income tax was considered unlikely as they had been raised in recent years, and corporate taxes were likewise unlikely to be increased as doing so might negatively affect how investors viewed Singapore. There was also some discussion over how much the GST might increase by (Kuan, 2017).

Commentators such as opposition politician Jeanette Chong-Aruldoss said that GST is considered a regressive tax, where the poor pay more tax as a percentage of their income than the rich and suggested that the government explore a capital gains tax or reintroduce estate duty which had been removed in 2008 instead (Chong-Aruldoss, 2017). The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) recalled how then Minister of Finance Tharman Shanmugaratnam had refuted rumours that the PAP government intended to raise the GST rate after the 2015 general election (The Straits Times, 2015). Saying that PM Lee’s speech was merely the latest in a string of government decisions to raise various fees such as the price of water, carpark fees, and Service and Conservancy Charges, the PAP, it argued, had broken its election promises in deed as well as in spirit (Singapore Democrats, 2017). WP Assistant Secretary-General Pritam Singh said that the PAP intended to renew its political leadership after the next general election and to introduce the GST hike soon which would allow for a two-year ramp-up to the eventual proposed rate, as the PAP government had done previously. This he postulated, would allow the new Prime Minister a “relatively clean slate” on which to start his term (Singh P. , 2017).

In the midst of this discussion, Senior Minister for Finance and Law Indranee Rajah said that the timeline for any tax increase had not been finalised, and in replying to WP’s Mr Singh said that the tax raise was not for political purposes but to support increased spending in areas such as health care, education, housing and general social support (Tham & Seow, 2017). She also suggested that one possible area that the government could also explore is taxing e-commerce, which was free of tax for the first \$400. While declining to speak on any specific changes to GST, Ms Rajah noted the broad nature of the GST and the offset packages that the government always put in place to mitigate the impact of GST on low income earners (The Straits Times, 2017d).

By the end of 2017, no further information regarding tax increases was released.

National Day Rally 2017

On August 20 2017, PM Lee delivered the annual National Day Rally (NDR) speech at ITE Central in English, Mandarin, and Malay. He focused on three topics: Preschool education, the Smart Nation Initiative, and fighting diabetes. (Lee H. L., 2017e)

Preschool Education

PM Lee began the speech by noting how important preschool education was to a child's development and while he emphasised that the primary influence on a child at the young age was its parents, he outlined the measures the government had undertaken in recent years to build-up preschool education such as creating half a million more childcare and kindergarten places, increasing subsidies to make preschool more affordable, and having the Ministry of Education (MOE) run kindergartens, with associated MOE-approved curriculum and -trained teachers.

To build on what had already been done, the government, he said, would be rolling out three new initiatives. First, it would create an additional 40,000 preschool places to bring the total number the government supported to 200,000. These places would be available in "Early Years Centres", which would target children of four years or younger and be located in new public Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates as well as partner nearby MOE Kindergartens so that children would have the assurance of preschool education until they are ready for primary school.

Second, the government would expand the number of MOE Kindergartens -- from 15 to 50 -- over the next five years, further raising the standards of preschool education in Singapore and providing parents with a trustworthy option for preschool.

Third, the government, PM Lee added, would attract good teachers and carers to preschool education; I would "train them well, reward them well, and attract good, passionate people." The government would do this by consolidating different preschool training programs in Temasek and Ngee Ann Polytechnics, the Institute of Technical Education, and the SEED institute, in a new centralised institute called the National Institute of Early Childhood Development. The rigour of the training at the new institute would compare favourably to that of the National Institute of Education to ensure that standards of teaching would be similar to that available to other government-trained teachers.

PM Lee also noted that the KidStart programme, designed to give children from low income families support, would begin even before the birth of the child. Trained officers will impart practical skills and knowledge on health, nutrition and child development to parents till the child enters preschool.

Summing up, he noted that the government was raising its expenditure on young children from \$360 million in 2012 to \$840 million in 2017 and expected to double the figure over the next five years.

Diabetes

PM Lee then spoke about combating the rise in incidence of diabetes. Noting that while life expectancy in Singapore ranged from 80 to 84 for men and women respectively, Singaporeans could expect to have eight years of ill health in old age, based on current experience, with a significant cause of it being diabetes; it would affect one in three Singaporeans over the age of 60. He shared recommendations for how young and old Singaporeans should maintain a

healthy lifestyle to stave off the disease -- get regular medical check-ups, engage in regular exercise, and eat healthily.

He said that the government was contemplating imposing a sugar tax or limiting the size of sweet drinks but would do so only if it was clear that such measures work.

Smart Nation

PM Lee then spoke about the Smart Nation Initiative, describing it as “taking full advantage of information technology to create new jobs, new business opportunities, and to make our economy more productive, to make our lives more convenient.” While Singapore had the advantage of being compact, highly connected and having a digitally literate citizenry, he noted that the country lagged behind other countries in adopting specific technologies such as electronic payments. He cited China where the use of cash was now largely obsolete. He mentioned that the Monetary Authority of Singapore was working to integrate existing and new systems to improve the adoption of the Smart Nation vision.

He also mentioned that there would be greater use of information technology (IT), data analytics and smart systems for security, transport, water management and the drainage system. In addition to these large projects, the government also wanted to use IT on smaller projects, such as paying for parking through a new app called parking.sg, to improve Singaporeans’ daily lives.

To facilitate this, there would be an increased need for skilled people such as engineers, programmers, data analyst, and technicians, and the government would seek to build up that talent pool of people by offering scholarships, sponsorships, and professional conversion programs.

Reactions

It was noted that 2017’s National Day Rally stood in contrast to those of previous years with the Prime Minister covering less topics but with those that were closer to home (Chng, 2017). Discussion was had on whether this was the “correct approach”, with some such as the National Solidarity party’s former secretary-general Lim Tean deeming the issues covered to be too low-level for a speech as important as the national day rally (Lim T. , 2017).. The Middle Ground’s Bertha Henson welcomed the more personal touch which made the Speech more relatable (Henson, 2017).

On PM Lee’s push towards a cashless society, commentary turned to implementation -- entrepreneur Lim Jialiang criticised schemes such as DBS Paylah! and the newly-introduced PayNow as requiring too many steps to use, and said that the barrier to adopting more cashless systems was the cost of renting the equipment needed and the fees incurred per transaction (Lim J. , 2017). Others such as Tan Min Liang, Chief Executive Officer of gaming peripherals maker Razer said that he would craft a proposal for a national payment system for implementation within 18 months if needed, to which PM Lee responded by inviting him to send it. Razer’s proposal was sent to the government two weeks later (Kwang, 2017). Mr Tan’s efforts was met with scepticism by NET’s CEO Jeffery Goh, who said that building the payment system was less difficult than convincing large numbers of businesses to use it (Tan W. , 2017).

Another notable set of exchange of opinions centred around the issue of diabetes. Former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Calvin Cheng posted on Facebook.com his opinion that eating healthier was not a simple choice for those with lower incomes, and that healthier foods such as brown rice and wholemeal bread were generally more expensive than less

healthy staples such as white rice and white bread. Even exercise, he felt, proved to be a challenge for those who were tired and had no time if they were struggling to make ends meet (Cheng C. , 2017).“

On the issue of preschool education, the Straits Times' Education correspondent Sandra Davie cited academic research that indicated that preschool education was a key contributing factor to educational outcomes later in life, saying that while Singaporeans students were ranked highly in mathematics, science, and reading at age 15, she wondered if Singapore should target being the top provider of high-quality and inclusive preschool education instead (Davie, 2017).

2017 Presidential Election

On 13 September, Halimah Yacob was declared the winner of the 2017 Presidential Election on that Nomination Day. She ran uncontested in the first race-reserved election in Singapore's history. The election was not without controversy with two aspiring candidates being denied certificates of eligibility as they did not meet the qualifying threshold for the shareholder value of the private sector companies they lead.

Changes in the elected presidency had been mooted, discussed, and passed in 2016. There were two of utmost significance -- the raising of the qualification criteria for private sector candidates to receive Certificates of Eligibility which allowed individuals to become candidates; and the introduction of the hiatus-triggered reservation mechanism. If after five presidential terms, no individual of one of three major ethnic groups in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, and the third category: Indian and Other) had become president, the next election would be reserved for candidates of that ethnic group (Looi, 2017).

Since the government counted the five terms from the point where President Wee Kim Wee was the first who was given the powers of the elected president (although not elected himself), the changes meant that incumbent president Dr Tony Tan would be unable to run for a second term. His opponent in the 2011 presidential election, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who had earlier indicated his desire to run again, challenged the timing of when the provision would kick-in but was unsuccessful (see the section below for the details). Eventually there would be five applicants for certificates of eligibility, although two failed to meet any sort of qualification criteria and declined to submit applications for community certification.

The run-up to the election focused on three possible candidates -- the eventual victor, and businessmen Salleh Marican and Farid Khan. The latter two would be given committee certificates for the Malay Community but were denied certificates of eligibility by the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) (Elections Department, 2017).

Marican had acknowledged that his clothing company did not meet the shareholder equity (SHE) requirement of \$500 million dollars, records indicated that it's SHE averaged \$258 million in the three years before 2017 but had made the argument that his experience of building a company from scratch was as valuable as running a \$500 million dollar SHE company. Nonetheless, his application was rejected (Chia L. , 2017). Farid Khan revealed his rejection letter to the Straits Times. In his submission to the PEC Khan had said that he was responsible for 18 companies that were part of the Bourbon Group with a SHE of about \$249 million. However, the PEC rejected this, accepting only his position as chairman of Bourbon Offshore Asia and a SHE of "between \$3 and \$8 million in the past three years" (Toh Y. C., 2017b).

Halimah Yacob was also certified by the Malay Community Committee and qualifying by dint of being Speaker of Parliament, a qualifying public sector role, won the election by means of walkover (Elections Department, 2017).

Other Changes to the Elected Presidency System

In January 2017, Parliament passed legislation that, amongst other things, moved the date of the election from its traditional August date to September, to prevent the continual clash of campaigning with the National Day Celebrations. As a result, the dates of the election of the 2017 contest were 13 September for nomination day and 23 September for polling day (Looi, 2017).

The introduction of Community Committee for the Elected Presidency is an integral part of the new hiatus-triggered system even in years where the election is not reserved as it must nonetheless identify the ethnic profile of the eventual winners. The Committee is to be made up of 16 members, five from each of the three major community blocs in Singapore: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (where the latter two are counted as a single bloc). While the function of the Committee would be similar to that for Group Representation Constituencies in parliamentary elections, it differed in that candidates from Singapore's Chinese majority would also be issued with community certificates to cater to the possibility of there being a reserved election for that community (Ministry of Communications and Information, 2017).

Contention

The changes made to the Elected Presidency and their implementation were opposed in various ways. The most prominent of these was a legal challenge raised by former presidential candidate Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who disagreed with the timing of the first reserved election. Arguing that the government should count five terms from the first president to win an election, Ong Teng Cheong in 1993, rather than the first president to wield the powers of the elected presidency, which was Wee Kim Wee in 1991 (Yong, 2017c).

The government would argue that there was no new case to be answered, and it was dismissed in August, despite Tan having engaged a Queen's Counsel to argue his case (Yong, 2017c). Tan would tell his supporters that he accepted the verdict "with a heavy heart". He would go on to warn that the ruling PAP could expect the adverse reaction to this in the next general election (Tan C. B., 2017).

Another area of contention related to how the system of the reserved election gelled with the Singaporean notion of meritocracy, particularly a race-blind meritocracy, and also over how prospective candidates were to be judged to be part of an ethnic community (Tan J., 2017b).

An example of the latter point revolved around "how Malay" the candidates were. Of the three candidates to receive a Malay Community Certificate, all experienced some questions on this front, two based on their ethnic background and one based on his facility with the Malay language. The Straits Times' Foreign Editor Zakir Hussain penned an op-ed essay that pointed out that the established means of determining one's race was "to let the community decide for itself", noting that Singapore's Malay community "has long held an expansive view of race and been open to newcomers and others keen to identify with it" (Hussain, 2017). This was reiterated by several government ministers, who stated that a prospective candidate must consider themselves part of the community and be considered by that community to be one them too (Soon & Tan, 2017).

After the election, a public protest was held at Speaker's Corner, Hong Lim Park, with a reported attendance varying between 800 to 2000 people. The protest would also involve the display of slogans like "#notmypresident" and "selected presidency" (Chin, 2017).

A common line of thinking was that the PAP would pay a political price for deciding to reserve the elected presidency, as was expressed by Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing at the 2017 Institute of Policy Studies conference on the Elected Presidency. He opined that PM Lee had shown leadership by taking the difficult decision to reform the system before any issue of lack of representation in this symbolic role of the country emerged. (Soon & Tan, 2017)

Pre-School Education and Kindergartens

On August 23, MOE announced that kindergartens it ran would be co-located with primary schools. Of the 15 MOE kindergartens (MK) in existence, 12 were already co-located with primary schools with the rest to be assigned later. At that time, MOE said that "there were currently no plans to give pre-schoolers priority admission to the primary school they are studying in" (Goy, 2017). On November 27, the ministry announced instead that from 2018 onwards, under pilot program, children attending MKs would be eligible for primary school registration under phase 2A2 along with children of former students and current staff members (Abu Baker, 2017). On both occasions, MOE emphasised that the aim of co-locating kindergartens and primary schools was to help the students make a smooth transition from preschool to primary one.

The second announcement was met with mixed reactions by parents, with those who were likely to be immediately affected expressing frustration or delight depending on whether their children were already enrolled in an MK (Abu Baker, 2017).

On January 9 2018, Minister for Education (Schools) Ng Chee Meng fielded questions from parliamentarians about the changes, like what would happen if the demand for kindergarten spots outstripped supply. They also gave voice to worries that "stress over school admissions" would move "upstream to kindergartens" (Teng, 2018). Minister Ng explained that after some analysis, it was found that there were "developmental benefits for young children if they stayed in a familiar environment". Should demand outstrip supply of spaces in MK, the minister assured parliamentarians that "a fair, transparent balloting system will take place".

Car and Motorcycle Growth Rate Freeze

On October 23, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) announced that effective from February 2018, it would lower vehicle growth rate from 2.25 percent per annum to 0 percent for all cars and motorcycles. The existing growth rate for commercial vehicles of 0.25% per annum would remain unchanged until the first quarter of 2021 (Land Transport Authority, 2017).

The LTA said that the cap was aimed at helping Singapore become "car-lite" given the country's land constraints, with 12% of total land area already being taken up by roads. LTA said there was limited scope for further expansion of the road network which meant that it was committed to improving the public transport system. The reason for leaving goods vehicles' growth rate unchanged until 2021 however was "to provide businesses more time to improve the efficiency of their logistics operations and reduce the number of commercial vehicles that they require." (Tan C. , 2017a).

The Singapore Motor Cycle Trade Association expressed dismay at the announcement, asking for an urgent meeting with the LTA, in a bid to reverse or delay the implementation of

this policy amid concerns that the motorcycle industry in Singapore might shrink (Siong, 2017b).

Experts such as Singapore University of Social Sciences' economist Walter Theseira commented that the freeze in vehicle growth would lead to upward pressure on COE prices. The National University of Singapore's transport researcher Lee Der-Hong said that the desire among Singaporeans to own a car was still very strong, and the shift towards a car-lite society was challenging given the problems of reliability that had risen in the public transport system. Local car dealers said they were expecting the halt in growth rates for several years, and that the announcement did not come as a surprise (Mahmud, 2017).

SMRT Train Issues

The LTA and SMRT sought to raise the level of public confidence in the train network, but some serious incidents made that challenging.

Train delays continued to plague the network, exemplified by delays that occurred on August 18 and September 28. While the train delays were unexceptional in and of themselves, they occurred on examination days for the Primary School Leaving Examination, the first being the day of an oral examination, and the second, the day of the English language examination. The former delay was on the North-South and the Downtown Line, and the latter was on the East-West line (Yuen, 2017). The latter delay prompted the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board to reiterate that students caught in train delays did not need to provide an excuse slip to prove they were delayed.

On 7 October, the tunnels between the Bishan and Braddell MRT stations were flooded and resulted in a 20-hour delay along the North-South Line (Channel NewsAsia, 2017e). Investigations found that while the facilities to prevent such flooding had adequate capacity and were in working condition, they had not been maintained for over six months, with corresponding records for maintenance having been falsified. A LTA report highlighted three possible causes for the flooding: accumulated silt and sludge preventing the first few warning switches from triggering, floating debris preventing the final, independently wired, warning switch from triggering; and staff failing to switch controls back to the correct setting after maintenance. The report reiterated that while the exact cause was impossible to confirm, if correct maintenance procedures had been followed, none of the failures nor the subsequent flooding would have occurred (Abdullah, 2017). As a result of the investigation eight employees responsible for the maintenance of the system involved were fired (Tan C. , 2017b).

On 15 November, a week after Minister of Transport Khaw Boon Wan answered questions in Parliament about the flooding incident, two trains travelling in the same direction along the East-West Line collided due to a signal fault at Joo Koon Station and injured over 15 people. It was only the second collision in over 30 years (Almenoar & Lee, 2017). In an attempt to reassure the public about SMRT's ongoing efforts, especially after the flooding incident, Minister Khaw and the SMRT leadership made a public apology at a press conference, with SMRT CEO, Mr Desmond Kuek saying the company took full responsibility (Channel NewsAsia, 2017g). Nonetheless, some Singaporeans remained doubtful about the leadership team's sincerity in taking responsibility for the situation and improving the system (Lay, 2017).

After these events, SMRT announced a more intensive maintenance schedule -- in addition to shorter operating hours for trains over the weekends of December, it conducted two full day closures, on December 10 and 17, both Sundays. It planned to keep up the pace in 2018 (SMRT, 2017).

SkillsFuture Scam

In 2017, SkillsFuture, a funding scheme that started in 2016 and is designed to help Singaporeans attain new skills was discovered to have been abused.

With all Singaporeans aged 25 years and older given \$500 worth of credits to spend on training courses, it was revealed in April that 4,400 Singaporeans had submitted fake claims for SkillsFuture credits – in effect, they had sought to “encash” these credits. In May, SkillsFuture Singapore, the organisation in charge of the scheme changed the process such that credits can now only be disbursed directly to training providers (Ng, 2017a).

In December a different scam was revealed. A five-person criminal syndicate had allegedly conspired to “submit forged documents to fraudulently obtain training subsidies from SkillsFuture Singapore, and to conceal the benefits from such criminal conduct”, resulting in close to \$40 million in fraudulent claims (Channel NewsAsia, 2017f). The fraud took place between April and November, with SkillsFuture Singapore detecting it in October (Alkhatib, 2017a). By the end of the year, the syndicate members had been arrested and were preparing for trial.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Cabinet Reshuffle, Speaker of Parliament, and PAP Leadership Renewal

On April 27 it was announced that there would be a number of changes made to the Cabinet with the most prominent being the promotion of Josephine Teo and Desmond Lee to full ministers.

Teo was appointed Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office and second Minister in the Ministry of Manpower, in addition to her position as Second Minister of Foreign Affairs and her role assisting Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean in population policy. Lee was appointed Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office in addition to his existing roles as Second Minister in the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of National Development. It was also announced that Teo Ser Luck would step down from his role as Minister of State for Manpower (Prime Minister’s Office, 2017a).

Following Halimah Yacob’s resignation as the Speaker of Parliament to stand as a candidate for President, a role that she subsequently won, it was announced on September 5 that Tan Chuan Jin would be appointed Speaker. Tan’s appointment saw Desmond Lee take over the role of Minister for Social and Family Development from him. Lee give up his appointments in the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Prime Minister’s Office (Prime Minister’s Office, 2017b).

Tan had been thought to be part of the group of three or four ministers who might be in consideration for becoming Singapore’s fourth prime minister. The discussion turned to the likelihood that Tan was no longer in that group (Toh Y. C., 2017a) (Jaipragas, 2017a). Tan himself stated that “there are many different roles and many different pathways that we all have to take.” Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Chan Chun Sing who is another person thought to be a potential prime minister, backed Tan for the Speaker’s role saying that “each of us will be required to play different roles at different stages of our development (Yong, 2017d).”

With the field of prospective prime ministers narrowed down to three: Chan, Minister for Finance Heng and Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung (Ng, 2017c), PM Lee said in an interview with American news outlet CNBC that while the decision about who would be the fourth prime minister had yet to be made, the younger ministers were a “strong team” and his successor was likely to be already in the Cabinet (Sim, 2017c).

Adding to the debate on the very last day of the year was the Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, who published a note on his Facebook page urging that the decision about succession would be announced in “6 – 9 months’ time”, and that PM Lee could formally designate the fourth generation’s choice of leader before the end of 2018 (Goh, 2017).

On January 5, 16 4th generation PAP office holders published an open letter stating that they intended to pick a leader “in good time”. The letter represented an unprecedented move on the part of the 4th generation ministers. At the same time, Ong stated in an interview with the Straits Times that he already had a leader in mind, as if to rule himself out. (Tham, Seow, & Toh, 4G ministers say they will settle on a leader 'in good time'; Ong Ye Kung says he has someone in mind, 2018). ESM Goh said on January 7 that his initial Facebook post of December 31 had “achieved its purpose” in eliciting a response from 4th generation ministers (Hong, 2018).

On January 26 2018, the PM Lee answered questions on succession while on an official visit to India. Reiterating that the 4th generation ministers knew his preference to hand over leadership after the next general election, “sooner rather than later”, he said that the ministers needed time to learn to work together and gain the trust of the public at large. Downplaying ESM Goh’s proposed timeline, PM Lee said that Goh was “speaking with the privilege of watching things rather than being responsible to make it happen”, and that the 6 - 9 month timeline proposed by Goh was not definitive (Ariffin, 2018). PM Lee also stated that he did not expect to appoint new deputy prime ministers in an upcoming cabinet reshuffle, due after the release of the 2018 national budget. He also said that people should not read too much into the omission of some ministers from the group of 16 who penned the open letter as that was not intentional (Lay, PM Lee: I’d like to hand over to a successor after the next election, 2018).

The WP’s 60th Anniversary and Announcement About Leadership Renewal

2017 saw Singapore’s largest opposition party, the WP, commemorate its 60th anniversary, and unveil its new permanent headquarters at Teambuild Centre along Geylang Road, which it had purchased and renovated with donations. This facility is located in Marine Parade GRC, the constituency that it had contested and won about 35% of the vote in the 2015 general election (The Straits Times, 2017b). It also launched a commemorative publication, *Walking with Singapore: The Workers’ Party 60th Anniversary*, edited by its member and current Non-Constituency MP, Daniel Goh. In it, its Secretary-General Mr Low Thia Kiang is quoted as saying in an interview, “I think we have managed to build a foundation of people for the party to take another step, or to evolve into the next stage of forming a potential alternative government” (Siau, 2017).

At a dinner to celebrate the milestone on November 3, Mr Low Thia Kiang announced that he would not contest for the post of Secretary-General at the next party election, a post which he had held since 2001 after Mr J. B. Jeyaretnam (The Straits Times, 2017c). Becoming an MP in 1991 by winning the Hougang single member constituency, he was the first opposition politician to lead a team that won a group representation constituency (GRC) – Aljunied GRC in the 2011 general election, and is the longest serving opposition MP in Singapore’s history (Toh E. , 2017a).

With the announcement, Mr Low said that having accomplished “the goals that he has set for himself - party renewal and electoral progress”, it was an appropriate time to let younger leaders take the party forward. He added that the party had “stabilised” and was “in good order” for him to hand over, stating his belief that Singaporeans would continue to support the WP even after the leadership change (Cheong, Low confident WP will still get support, 2017b).

The announcement came as a mild surprise to many observers who noted that Mr Low is still young and but also recognised that he had been challenged in his position of Secretary-General of the Party in 2016 by Mr Chen Show Mao, a fellow MP in Aljunied GRC (Toh E. , 2017b). Commentators said that possible successors were parliamentarians and the party's Chairman, Sylvia Lim and Assistant Secretary-General, Pritam Singh (Yong, 2017e).

Renaming of Syonan Gallery

In February 2017 the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) reacted to the displeasure over the naming of a public exhibition about Singapore's experience of World War II by renaming it. Initially called "Syonan Gallery: War and Its Legacies", the exhibition was formerly known as "Memories at Old Ford Factory", the site of the British surrender to the Empire of Japan during the fall of Singapore in 1942. After an apology by Minister for Communications and Information Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the title of the exhibition was changed to "Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and Its Legacies" on February 17 (Zaccheus, 2017a).

Public outcry was over the contentious nature of the name "Syonan-To", given to Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. While there was no dispute over the nature of the occupation, critics questioned whether naming the gallery "Syonan" was appropriate or might accidentally "suggest a celebration of the time period" (Zaccheus, 2017b). The name was not universally rejected, with one survivor of the occupation saying that "enough time had passed", while another commentator saying that the name was indeed negative, but it was a "good way to join those less aware of the horrors associated with the war". The National Library Board, which oversees the NAS, said that the name was picked because it could "evoke strong emotions", adding that it had consulted with historians and its advisory panel (Zaccheus, 2017c).

Minister Yaacob explained his decision to rename the gallery, saying he was "sorry for the pain the name has caused", and that it was "never our intention". The purpose of the exhibition was designed "to capture the dark days of the Japanese occupation and remind ourselves never to take for granted our peace, harmony and sovereignty (Zaccheus, 2017d)."

PM Lee weighed in on the issue as well, thanking those who had shared views, saying "such conversations bring us closer together" (The Straits Times, 2017a).

The exhibition was opened to the public on 16 February 2017 and remains open.

Oxley Road Dispute

On 14 June, Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Wei Ling (the Lee Siblings), the younger children of Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and siblings of PM Lee, released an open letter through Facebook entitled "What happened to Lee Kuan Yew's values?" (Lee & Lee, 2017a)

The letter detailed worries that their brother was abusing his power as prime minister to suppress opposing views, with his behaviour regarding the Lee family home at 38 Oxley Road as evidence of this. They also stated that while they had lost confidence in their brother, they retained confidence in the government of Singapore, yet they added that Lee Hsien Yang and his wife Lee Suet Fern were planning to leave Singapore in the near future as they thought the organs of state were being mobilised against them (Lee & Lee, 2017a).

In the letter, the siblings alleged that PM Lee sought to use the house at 38 Oxley Road to bolster his political reputation by further augmenting it with that of his father's legacy, perhaps even wishing to pass the house to and building a political dynasty around PM Lee's son, Li Hong Yi. This, despite PM Lee's public position that he wished for his father's will to be carried out, and that the house be demolished. They further alleged that despite a promise to recuse

himself from government decisions regarding the house, a secret ministerial committee had been set up which asked questions on the circumstances around the writing of the late Lee Kuan Yew's final will which spelt out the latter's wishes for the property (Lee & Lee, 2017a). PM Lee, who was overseas at the time of the publication of the letter, released a statement later in the day refuting their allegations (Lee H. L., 2017f).

Over the following days, there would be a constant flow of allegations and rebuttals, mostly over the medium of Facebook, with the Lee Siblings and members of the government getting involved. There were numerous instances of Singaporeans, particularly those with online followings, writing either in favour or against the Lee Siblings, PM Lee, and even all three. This sequence slowed, but did not stop on the June 19, when PM Lee returned to Singapore and released a video where he apologised to Singaporeans that a private matter had been allowed to become public, and for any loss of confidence in the government this might have caused (Lee H. L., 2017a). He said he would make a statement when Parliament was to sit on 3 July, and that the party whip would be lifted to encourage MPs of both parties to question him freely about the matter.

The parliamentary debate took place over July 3 and 4, with over 30 MPs rising to speak. PM Lee gave the opening and closing statements, while other members of his government responded to allegations which involved the operations of their respective offices. PM Lee released his parliamentary statement as statutory declarations, in a bid to show that he was willing to stand behind them in a court of law (Lee H. L., 2017b).

On July 6, the Lee Siblings declared that they would cease publishing documents related to the matter in public and try to settle them, once again, behind closed doors (Lee & Lee, 2017b). As of the end of the year, both PM Lee and Lee Hsien Yang indicated it had yet to be resolved.

Conflicts of interest

The issue revolved around disputed claims of conflict of interest, with the Lee Siblings saying that members of the Cabinet who were professionally subordinate to PM Lee should not be "sitting arbitrating an issue related to their boss (Channel NewsAsia, 2017c)."

One example of that related to the ministerial committee that had been set up to consider options for the house at 38 Oxley Road that the Lee Siblings said was a "secret committee". Comprising Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Teo Chee Hean, Minister of Law K Shanmugam, Minister of National Development Lawrence Wong, and Minister of Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, the Lee Siblings were suspicious about whether it was a way in which PM Lee could have his way with the house despite his public recusal on the matter as son of the late owner (Teo C. H., 2017). They also said that Minister Shanmugam had been consulted by the late Mr Lee on options regarding the house and therefore, his presence on the committee was a "clear conflict of interest." Minister Shanmugam said that he was "well aware of the rules of conflict" and that the allegations were "quite baseless" (Channel NewsAsia, 2017c).

PAP MPs Louis Ng and Muralli Pillai questioned the need for and the role of the Committee, as the current law did not require such a committee or the opinions of the children of the late Mr Lee; and Christopher de Souza asked if there had been undue influence by the PM (Seow J. , 2017a) (De Souza, 2017).

DPM Teo, who chaired the Committee, replied by saying that the government had not only the legal powers required to act, but "the responsibility to decide what to do... Government cannot outsource decision-making on this." The Committee was not unique in purpose, but merely one of several similar committees that were set up when issues required it – to do the

groundwork in understanding the issue, and making recommendations for policy such as the case with Singapore's Smart Nation Initiative and infant formula. (Kotwani, 2017a).

The Committee's purpose was not to decide what would happen to the property, but to prepare "drawer plans of various options" after doing the research by speaking to those who might know the late Mr Lee's mind on the matter. And as the government had no intention of making a decision "so long as Dr Lee (Wei Ling) continues staying in the house" in accordance to the late Mr Lee's will, no decision would have been taken on it (Kotwani, 2017a).

Similar conflict of interest issues were raised concerning conduct after the late Mr Lee's passing. Lee Hsien Yang said that PM Lee had used his position to obtain a deed of gift regarding some of the late Mr Lee's possessions to be placed on display, and that should not have happened as PM Lee was not an executor of the late Mr Lee's will. Mr Lawrence Wong who was Minister of Community, Culture and Youth at that time said that PM Lee was given the deed of gift in his official capacity. Minister Wong stated that the Lee siblings had "imposed unusual conditions for the use of the items" (Au-Yong, 2017b) which is what caused PM Lee to write to his siblings about that. The PM also rubbished the idea that just because he had seen the deed of gift as the prime minister, that he could not "raise the matter with a family member", saying that he had a duty to right wrongs "even (with) family, maybe especially with family. (Seow J. , 2017b)" His concern stemmed from "onerous and unreasonable" terms demanded of the National Heritage Board for the late Mr Lee's items.

There was also a question of the role of PM Lee's wife, Ho Ching, and whether she had an undue influence over the government, with the Lee Siblings saying that she had purloined items in the 38 Oxley Road house without their permission and had done so under the guise of assisting the Prime Minister's Office, a body in which she had no official role in (Channel NewsAsia, 2017d).

The issue of Lucien Wong's appointment as Attorney General after having been PM Lee's personal lawyer was raised in the Lee Siblings' initial open letter, and this was taken up in Parliament by WP's Sylvia Lim. Lim had previously questioned Wong's appointment in 2016 due to his age (Yong, 2017a). She had also called the appointment of former PAP MP Hri Kumar to the post of Deputy Attorney General "not ideal" due to his previous political affiliation (Tan M. , 2017). Lim used the dispute to highlight potential conflicts of interest inherent in their appointment (Salleh, 2017a). Senior Minister of State for Law Indranee Rajah rejected the concerns, saying that both men were experienced lawyers and knew to recuse themselves from any issue that they had previously been involved in; in this case, that Lucien Wong would recuse himself from dealing with any matters regarding Oxley Road (Kotwani, 2017b).

Worker's Party, and possible legal action

WP's Low said that he was "perplexed and lost" on the dispute and compared it to a "Korean drama show". He said that the central issue seemed to be about the blurring of the lines between private and public interests, saying that a clear delineation between the two was the "foundation of Singapore's unforgiving anti-corruption stance". Calling the allegations against PM Lee "vague" and based on "scant evidence centred on family displeasure", he said that if the accusers had details or concrete evidence of PM Lee's abuse of power, they should have publicised immediately rather than indulge in "waging a continuous media campaign to keep the nation in suspense (Low, 2017)."

He also took the government to task for contributing to the squabble and "making counter-allegations." Saying that "good government cannot be achieved in social media", the matter should be resolved in court. Responding to the point about how previous prime minister -- Goh Chok Tong managed similar allegations about the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew with a thorough

investigation (Yong, 2017b) -- he said that the WP could not be conclusively convinced that PM Lee had acted appropriately based on his own say so as it would be “ownself defend ownself in a Parliament with PAP MPs”.

Reiterating his call for the matter to be resolved in court, he noted that WP politicians been sued for things that were much less consequential -- “Own siblings, cannot sue, after all we all brother and sister. But political opponents and critics, sue until your pants drop! (Lee U.-W. , 2017)”

This was also in response to what the PM had said in his initial statement to Parliament – that he would not want to “besmirch his parent’s name” by taking legal action, which might also stretch out the dispute for years, preventing the very thing that Low had called for, the quick resolution of the dispute (Lee H. L., 2017c).

PM Lee also acknowledged the calls for an investigation by Low as well as members of his own party and NCMPs but rejected them as “there are no specifics to the headline charge of abuse of power”; no one to stand behind the allegations or any evidence offered. He said there had been opportunity for MPs, especially opposition MPs to either reach out to the PM’s accusers or for those accusers to tell MPs their allegations, but neither had happened. Because of this, there was no basis for a Select Committee or Commission of Inquiry (Lee H. L., 2017c).

PM Lee also expressed his desire for the dispute to be handled behind closed doors and for a reconciliation with his siblings. This sentiment was reflected in a statement released on July 6 by the Lee Siblings. While refusing to back down from their core contention about PM Lee’s misuse of power, they said they did not “wish to see Singapore embroiled in a never-ending public argument” and that “for now, we will cease presenting further evidence on social media, provided that our fathers’ wish are not attacked or misrepresented” added that it was ultimately up to the government and people of Singapore to “decide whether and how to hold Lee Hsien Loong to account (Lee & Lee, 2017c).”

In October, PM Lee was asked about the dispute by the media and said the matter was “in abeyance” (Cheng K. , 2017a), with his siblings responding the day after saying that PM Lee had, thus far, made no attempt to resolve the dispute (Choo, 2017).

Sentiment, Online and Public – the conflict on social media

The Oxley Road Saga was carried out in a public manner on social media, specifically Facebook. Lee Hsien Yang published notes, his responses to PM Lee or Cabinet Ministers’ views and all his posts were shared by Dr Lee Wei Ling’s account, which she had previously used to share her views too. Cabinet members who posted their rebuttals on Facebook included Minister of Law K Shanmugam, Minister of National Development Lawrence Wong, and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam (Shanmugam, 2017) (Wong, 2017) (Shanmugaratnam, 2017). PM Lee’s wife, Ms Ho Ching, also replied to posts via social media (Tan J. , 2017a) (Sim, 2017a).

These rebuttals were shared and commented on by hundreds of users, if not thousands in addition to coverage by mainstream media outlets. Local online news outlets such as Mothership and The Middle Ground kept readers updated on the latest developments (The Middle Ground, 2017). There was also a public protest held in Hong Lim Park on July 15 attended by around 400 people (Seow J. , 2017c).

A survey conducted online by market research consultancy Blackbox Research found that 40 percent of those polled felt more evidence was needed before they could make up their minds,

with those thinking the allegations were either false or true comprising 15 percent and 20 percent of the responses respectively (Ng, 2017b).

Li Hong Yi, Li Sheng Wu, and court action

The late Lee Kuan Yew's grandsons, Li Hong Yi and Li Sheng Wu, the sons of Lee Hsien Loong and Lee Hsien Yang respectively, became part of the dispute. After all, as explained, Lee Hsien Yang's initial post had claimed the PM Lee and his wife were preserving 38 Oxley Road as part of a grander scheme to build up political standing for Li Hong Yi. Li Hong Yi, responding in a Facebook post, said "For what it is worth, I really have no interest in politics (Tham, 2017)."

Li Shengwu shared his father's post and was in general, critical of the way in which Singaporean mainstream media as well as international media covered the story. On July 15, he shared an article by the Wall Street Journal that summarised the dispute, saying that foreign media were muted in their coverage due to previous legal proceedings in Singaporean courts against them, after all, "the Singapore Government is very litigious and has a pliant court system" which would, presumably judge any matter in favour of the political leaders (Seow & Salleh, 2017).

The Attorney General's Chambers (AGC) viewed the comment as an "egregious and baseless attack on the judiciary" and demanded that Li apologise. Li refused, saying that his post was private, it had been posted with a "friends only" privacy setting on Facebook, and that he had amended the post to reflect that the target of his ire was the government's use of litigation, not the courts itself. Despite the privacy setting, the post was published by several other websites (Cheong, 2017a). The AGC is continuing to take legal action against Li, who has declined to return to Singapore for proceedings and remains in the United States (US) where he currently works.

The case is ongoing as of the beginning of 2018.

Jolovan Wham – Activism and Court Action

On 29 November, civic activist Jolovan Wham appeared in court to face seven charges stemming from three incidents. On November 26 2016 he held a forum in Singapore which involved a Skype interview with Hong Kong Democracy activist Joshua Wong on "the role of civil disobedience and democracy in building social movement". Wong did not attend the conference in person. On June 3 2017, he allegedly held an event on a SMRT train on the North-South Line to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Operation Spectrum. And on July 13 2017, Wham held a vigil at a bus stop outside Changi Prison for Prabakaran Srivijayan, who had been executed for drug offenses (Alkhatib, 2017b).

In addition to these public assemblies, Wham had refused to sign police statements related to these public assemblies and a charge of vandalism for two A4 size pieces of paper bearing the slogans "Marxist Conspiracy?" and "Justice for Operation Spectrum survivors", each accompanied by the hashtag #notodetentionwithouttrial that he had adhered to the wall of a train at the June 3 event. 16 other people are being investigated for their participation in the July 13 vigil (Alkhatib, 2017b).

The charging of Wham was met with protest by local and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Organisations such as Think Centre, Saynoi, Project X, Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaign, Function 8, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called for the dismissal of the charges (The Online Citizen, 2017) (Amnesty International, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Wham himself said that Singaporeans "should think about

whether or not our laws are too restrictive (Jaipragas, 2017b). As of the end of 2017, the case was ongoing.

On December 6, Wham was issued a stern warning for using Singaporean and Malaysian National Flags at event in support of Malaysian political movement Bersih 5 at Hong Lim Park (Sin, 2017).

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Relations with China and the Terrex Incident

On November 23 2016, nine Terrex Infantry Carrier Vehicles were detained in Hong Kong's Kwai Chung Container Terminal while being shipped to Singapore from Taiwan where they were had been used in the Starlight Military Exercises (Channel NewsAsia, 2017a). The vehicles were impounded for over two months before they returned to Singapore on January 30 2017 (Channel NewsAsia, 2017b).

This event came at the end of the year marked by increasing tension between Singapore and the People's Republic of China (PRC) – an issue anticipated PM Lee in his 2016 National Day Rally. He noted the disputes arising from competing claims between China and some ASEAN neighbours over islands in the South China Sea, as well as a “spat” with nationalistic Chinese newspaper *Global Times* over other events that occurred at the 2016 Non-Aligned Movement summit again involving South China Sea issues (Zhou, 2016).

The Terrex incident played to a number of issues in Sino-Singaporean relations, particularly that of Singapore's military training in the Republic of China, or Taiwan, considered a renegade province of the PRC, which have dated as far back as 1975. Despite Hong Kong port authorities saying that the detention was due to a licensing issue, there was speculation on some fronts that they were part of a Chinese strategy of intimidation, targeted not only that Singapore but also at Taiwan that had recently elected a pro-independence candidate for president (Chan M. , 2016).

Notable during this time was a warning issued by Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang after the Singaporean government had written to the Hong Kong, a self-administered region of China with its own governing body, requesting the return of the vehicles. Lu Kang's statement urged Singaporean authorities to be careful about its remarks and actions, and stressed “that China hopes other nations, including Singapore, follow the one-China principle” (Jaipragas & Wong, 2017). This followed an earlier statement released by another Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Chuang on November 25 2016 that “The entry and exit of foreign personnel and goods in the Hong Kong special administrative region should respect its relevant laws,” and that “the Chinese government consistently and resolutely opposes any form of official exchanges, including military exchanges and cooperation, between countries with which we have diplomatic relations and the Taiwan region” (Torode & Zaharia, 2016). On November 30 2016, nationalistic tabloid *Global Times* published an editorial stating that the vehicles should be “melted down”, criticising Singapore's perceived alignment with the US and its relationship with Taiwan (Chong, 2016).

Singaporean leaders for their part stated that the vehicles were the property of the Singaporean government and that they disputed their detention. Speaking in Parliament, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan stated that it was “important for (Singapore) to conduct our foreign policy as a sovereign independent nation, and not be seen as acting at the behest of any other country” (Lee P. , 2017). Minister of Defence Ng Eng Hean reiterated Singapore's ongoing support of the One China Policy and its determination “to comply with all regulations and then exercise our full rights in recovering our assets (Ong, 2016).” Singapore's

Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan, responding to comments on his Facebook page noted that it was not just important to be firm with China, but that being seen to capitulate would have knock-on effects with regard to how other regional powers might relate to Singapore (Kausikan, 2016).

Also at play was the response of Singaporeans themselves -- online responses spanned from demanding an immediate return of the vehicles to those who felt Singapore had erred and should apologise, including one poorly subscribed online petition (Lim & Tan, 2016). The two narratives were stark -- one side said that China was taking the opportunity to “bully” Singapore, and the other claimed that PM Lee had antagonised China with Singapore’s statements on the South China Sea and unwittingly precipitated the tension (Salleh, 2016).

Expulsion of Foreign Agent

On August 4, Singapore expelled China-born American academic Huang Jing from the country for working as an “agent of influence” for an unnamed foreign government. Huang left the country on September 8 when his appeal to the authorities to stay was denied (Sim, 2017b). Speculation that Huang was working on behalf of China was rife, but unconfirmed by any party, and while observers were certain that his expulsion was a message, it was unclear to the public at large what message was being sent (Ibrahim, 2017). Notably, the expulsion occurred just before Singapore and China’s foreign ministers met at an ASEAN meeting in Manila on August 6 where they reaffirmed the two nations’ warm ties, as well as a visit by Singaporean leaders to China a fortnight later (Siong, 2017a).

Diplomatic Relations and ASEAN

In 2017, Singaporean leaders emphasised the delicate balancing act they had to maintain as they visited China, the US, while shoring up defence ties with India, Australia and prepared to take over the Chairmanship of ASEAN.

PM Lee’s China visit from September 19 to 21 saw him meet four of the seven members of China’s Politburo Standing Committee, its highest governing body, including President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. Accompanying him were the Ministers for Defence, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Prime Minister’s Office, Ng Eng Hen, Vivian Balakrishnan, Heng Swee Keat, and Chan Chun Sing respectively (Prime Minister’s Office, 2017c). It was notable that the visit came just before the 19th Party Congress, a major Communist Party meeting where the leaders of China and their successors are often introduced, with the PM Lee noting that it was a “busy time” for China’s leaders. Singapore reaffirmed warm ties with the country and our interest in China’s One Belt One Road Initiative (Lim Y. L., 2017).

This was followed by an official visit to the US from October 22 to 26, where PM Lee met the American president Donald Trump, as well as other American leaders. In addition to signing a \$19 billion deal to buy 39 Boeing aircraft, the leaders also spoke about security issues, with PM Lee saying that he hoped the visit would help persuade America to keep “focused on the region” (Jagdish, 2017).

On October 24 Singaporean and Indian Ministers of Defence Ng Eng Hen and Nirmala Sitharaman respectively met to discuss how to improve Singaporean-Indian defence relations. Noting the two countries’ “[s]trong and long-standing defence relationship”, especially in view of 2015’s Defence Cooperation Agreement, which covered cooperation in maritime security, as well as bilateral training and exercises, they stated that there was a strong basis to build upon (Dancel, 2017).

On November 14, PM Lee attended the 31st Asean Summit in Manila where Singapore took over the chairmanship of the group for 2018. Describing Asean as a “lifeboat” for its ten members, he urged the group to work together and move towards closer economic integration and to combat security threats such as terrorism (Yong, 2017f).

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