

## The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2020

By Tasha Tan  
*Research Assistant*

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## INTRODUCTION

This document provides a review of key policy and political developments in Singapore in 2020. These were, in large part, the country's response to the multi-faceted implications of the outbreak of a new strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) which spread from China to Singapore and globally in January. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared its emergence a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, and a pandemic by 11 March. Apart from the figures relating to 2020's economic performance, which were officially reported in February 2021, the discussion in this documents draws on developments up to December 31 that year.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) made early projections in November 2019 that GDP growth for 2020 would be 0.5 to 2.5 per cent (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2019). By the time the national budget for 2020 was proposed in February 2020, those early projections for 2020 had to be adjusted to -0.5 to 1.5 per cent in consideration of the outbreak of COVID-19 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020). This was further downgraded to a contraction between 4 and 7 per cent in May 2020, and an annual contraction between 6 and 6.5 per cent in September 2020 after obtaining realised numbers from the third quarter that indicated the economic crisis that had taken hold in Singapore, as it did the world.

MTI reported on February 15, 2021, that actual GDP for 2020 contracted by 5.4 per cent (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2021). More specifically, GDP shrank by 0.2 per cent in the first quarter, then 13.4 per cent, 5.6 per cent, and 3.8 per cent in the second, third and fourth quarters, respectively (Subhani, 2021).

The 2020 annual average overall unemployment rate was 3 per cent, and the annual average resident unemployment rate was 4.1 per cent. In comparison, the figures for 2019 were 2.3 per cent and 3.1 per cent, respectively. The 2020 overall unemployment rate was similar to that of the 2009 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), at 3 per cent, but less severe than the 2003 SARS period, at 4 per cent (Ministry of Manpower 2020). MTI had initially announced the overall unemployment rate to be 2.4 per cent in the first quarter of 2020. Unemployment rates in the third and fourth quarters of 2020 were 3.6 per cent and 3.2 per cent, respectively.

In terms of income inequality, Singapore's Gini coefficient was 0.452, and 0.375 after government transfers and taxes in 2020 (Lai, 2020a), which was the same as 2019, at 0.452 before adjustments for government transfers and taxes (Abdullah, 2020). Median monthly income for employed households including employer CPF contributions was \$9,189 in 2020, down from \$9,429 in 2019, registering 2.5 per cent decrease (Department of Statistics 2020, n.d.) indicating the effects of the year's twin public health and economic crises.

Singapore's total population was 5.69 million in 2020. This was a slight decrease of 3 per cent from 2019 due to the exit of some portion of non-residents. The citizen population grew by 0.6 per cent to reach 3.52 million, the permanent resident population remained stable at 0.52 million, and the non-resident population decreased by 2.1 per cent to reach 1.64 million, due to a reduction in foreign employment in the services sector (Strategy Group, 2020).

## POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

### The COVID-19 Pandemic

On December 31, 2019, Chinese officials investigated a cluster of 27 pneumonia-like cases of unknown causes in Wuhan after rumours on social media suggested that it could be related to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (“Chinese Officials Investigate Cause of Pneumonia Outbreak in Wuhan”, 2020). On January 3, in response, Singapore’s Ministry of Health (MOH) implemented temperature screening for travellers arriving from Wuhan, China (Ministry of Health, 2020a). On January 20, precautionary measures were ramped up to include temperature screening for all travellers from China (Ministry of Health, 2020b).

On January 22, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong announced the formation of a Multi-Ministry Taskforce to “deal with the eventuality” of the virus. The Taskforce had its first meeting on January 23 (Baker, 2020a).

On January 23, Singapore reported its first imported case of novel coronavirus that was related to the outbreak of pneumonia in China, resulting in contact tracing from the first confirmed case and quarantine of close contacts, and ramp-up of precautionary measures (Ministry of Health, 2020a).

From January 23 to 30, the five million masks that were distributed to retailers by the government were “snapped up” by the public (T. Goh, 2020). On January 31, the public were asked to not wear a mask unless they were unwell, and to refrain from hoarding them (T. Goh, 2020). The government distributed another 5.2 million masks to 1.37 million households from February 1 (Zhang et al., 2020).

#### *DORSCON Orange and Panic Buying*

Due to the confirmation of coronavirus cases with no known links to previous cases or travel history to China, PM Lee announced the government would raise the city-state’s Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) level from Yellow to Orange on February 7 (Mohan & Baker, 2020).

The DORSCON framework accounts for both disease spread and severity of the disease to predict its impact on the community. An Orange status indicates that the disease is severe and can spread easily but it has not spread widely and is being contained. It also indicates that there would be moderate disruptions to daily living such as quarantine measures, temperature screenings, and visitor restrictions at hospitals (Thet, 2020a).

After PM Lee announced the DORSCON Orange status, many Singaporeans flocked to the supermarkets to stock up on essentials like groceries and toilet paper. Fear that there would be disruptions to the supply of these essentials across the Asia and the world likely caused Singaporeans to do so, even as local supermarket chains including FairPrice assured the public that there were sufficient stocks as long as there was no panic-buying and hoarding. Assistant Professor Liew Kai Khiun of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Professor Paulin Straughan of Singapore Management University (SMU) both commented that public communications could have been better delivered to mitigate such behaviour. On a more positive note, many Singaporeans also started initiatives such as “#braveheartsg”, where they distributed free breakfasts for nurses and medical masks to the elderly (Low & Chandra, 2020).

### *Naming of COVID-19 and Emergence of Community Clusters*

On February 11, the coronavirus was officially named “COVID-19” by the WHO (BBC News, 2020). Soon, cases were reported from Grace Assembly of God church and a SAFRA Jurong Chinese New Year event on February 12 and February 15, respectively, which were eventually identified as clusters (Baker, 2020b; Chong & Yip, 2020).

At the time, Singapore’s performance received recognition where its detection of cases was touted as the “gold-standard of near-perfect detection” by four epidemiologists at Harvard University on February 18 (Kurohi, 2020a), and on February 20 similarly praised by the WHO for its efforts in tackling cases and its approach in public communication on the public health threat (*The Straits Times*, 2020).

### *Circuit Breaker and Explosion of Cases in Foreign Worker Dormitories*

Due to the increase in the daily number of new COVID-19 cases and the emergence of clusters of infection, PM Lee announced on April 3 that the country would begin its soft lockdown or “circuit breaker” from April 7 to May 4, to reduce the risk of a big outbreak and bring case numbers down gradually (CNA, 2020a). Around the time, Singapore reported a daily high of new cases — 120 of which 116 were local cases, and four were imported. A significant number of the local cases were linked to two clusters in the foreign worker dormitories (Baker, 2020c).

During the circuit breaker, most workplaces were closed except those providing essential services, e.g., hawker centres food courts and coffeeshops, optician shops, clinics (Ministry of Trade and Industry, n.d.). Schools moved to full home-based learning (Baker, 2020c). People were not allowed to leave their homes except to access essential goods and services. They were also not allowed to gather in groups and could only interact with members of the same household. Other exceptions included caring for an elderly or disabled person, reporting for national service, moving home, complying with a court order, or seeking and rendering help in an emergency (Gov.sg, 2020b). Businesses that were critical for the global supply chains such as those involved in manufacturing of semiconductors, biopharmaceutical, and petrochemicals were also allowed to stay open (Tang, 2020a).

The circuit breaker was not considered a full lockdown because of those exceptions but also because the government wished to convey that life, school, business were to continue albeit online.

Those who flouted circuit breaker measures would receive a \$300 fine starting from April 11 (Y. H. Goh, 2020a). This was after the authorities issued more than 3,000 stern warnings on the second day of the circuit breaker, on April 9 (CNA, 2020b).

The circuit breaker was effective in slowing down the spread in the community and imported cases. However, attention turned to the cases in the foreign worker dormitories as Singapore saw its largest number of cases for a day — 1,371 — on April 20. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) announced the next day that all foreign workers would stop work until May 4 (Baker, 2020c). There is an in-depth discussion of the spread and management of COVID-19 in the foreign worker dormitories in a later section of this report.

### *Extension of Circuit Breaker*

As Singapore wanted to bring down community cases “decisively”, PM Lee announced on April 21 that the circuit breaker was to be extended till June 1. There were 1,111 total new

cases that day (Mohan, 2020). The extension of the circuit breaker brought about tighter measures such as the closing of barber and hairdressing services. Stalls that only sold drinks had to close.

On May 12, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said Singapore's circuit breaker measures had shown promise in reducing the number of COVID-19 cases in the local community. There were about eight new community cases daily in May, compared with more than 30 new community cases daily in April. Additionally, the number of cases from the dormitories had stabilised. Hence, Singapore was on track to ease restrictions on June 1 (Lai, 2020c).

#### *Phase 1*

On May 19, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce announced that the circuit breaker would end on June 1, and Singapore would reopen in three phases (Lai, 2020c). Schools reopened on June 2, with most students alternating weekly between online learning and learning in school (Davie, 2020). Additionally, other services that could resume included specialised healthcare services like chronic disease management and traditional Chinese medicine treatments, automotive services, basic pet grooming, and colouring and chemical treatments at hair salons. Dining out at food and beverage outlets was still not allowed (Chia, 2020). Patrons had to access these services with safe-distancing measures and check-in with SafeEntry, a national digital check-in system.

#### *Phase 2*

On June 15, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce announced that Singapore would enter Phase 2 on June 19, as the number of community cases had been low with a seven-day moving average of 6.6 in spite of increased workplace activity in Phase 1. Also, the number of dormitory cases had declined, and no new large clusters had emerged (Baker, 2020d).

#### *Phase 3 and Arrival of Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccines*

On December 14, PM Lee announced that Singapore would enter Phase 3 on December 28 as the number of community cases been consistently low. Up to eight people would be allowed to meet at social gatherings and make house visits. Additionally, capacity limits in public places like malls, attractions, and places of worship were to be eased (Chew, 2020e).

On December 21, Singapore received its first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines for COVID-19 (Chew, 2020f). Earlier, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce had announced on December 14 its plans for Singaporeans to get vaccinated. It was revealed that the government had secured advanced purchase agreements with Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and Sinovac, and a few other pharmaceutical companies. An Expert Committee was in place to guide policy on the best way to deploy the vaccines across the population to achieve optimal health outcomes. Those who were at greater risk of infection, such as healthcare and frontline workers and the elderly, were to be given priority in receiving the vaccine (Gov.sg, 2020g). Workers from Singapore Airlines and the workforce based at Changi Airport received the vaccine in January 2021 in an effort to get the aviation sector get back on its feet as soon as possible (T. W. Toh, 2021).

How did Singapore fare in its response to COVID-19 compared with the rest of the world? In the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity (FREOPP) World Index of Healthcare Innovation, Singapore ranked ninth in terms of its COVID-19 policy response according to number of COVID-19 fatalities per million, lockdown stringency, and global integration or isolation (Roy, 2020). According to *Time* magazine, Singapore was ranked second, after

Taiwan, in terms of healthcare management, political response, and financial policy response to COVID-19 (Bremmer, 2020).

## **Budget 2020**

### *Unity Budget*

On February 18, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat proposed the national budget worth \$106 billion for Financial Year 2020/2021 which was framed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic when people faced uncertainty about their future and jobs (Kok, 2020). The budget comprised measures to aid families and businesses through an expected recession but also several measures to take forward the economic transformation that the government had already started. The budget included measures to address climate change too.

First, under the COVID-19 measures were a \$1.6 billion Care and Support Package, a \$4 billion Stabilisation and Support Package, and \$800million to support the work of the healthcare sector as it led the response to the pandemic.

The Care and Support Package allowed every Singaporean aged 21 and above to receive a one-time cash pay-out of between \$100 and \$300. Singaporeans aged 50 and above received a \$100 top-up into their PAssion Card (Oh, 2020a). Each parent was to receive \$100 if they had at least one child under 21 years old. Eligible HDB households received GST voucher-Usave rebates.

The Stabilisation and Support Package consisted of a \$1.3billion Job Support Scheme, a \$1.1 billion Wage Credit Scheme, and various rental and tax rebates. To prevent workers in badly-hit sectors from being retrenched, the Job Support Scheme provided employers an 8 per cent cash grant or up to \$3,600 on the gross monthly wages per employee on their CPF payslip for October to December 2020 (Tang, 2020b). The Wage Credit Scheme, which supports enterprises embarking on transformation efforts and encourages them to share productivity gains with workers in the form of wage increases, was enhanced in the 2020 budget. Previously, the scheme co-funded wage increases for Singaporean workers of up to \$4,000. This was raised to \$5,000 in 2020. Government co-funding was raised from 15 per cent in 2019 to 20 per cent in 2020.

Also included was a \$6 billion Assurance Package that would be set aside. It would fund offsets to households for five years if and when the 2 percentage point rise in goods and services tax (GST) announced previously by the government should be introduced.

Mr Heng stated that the lull period due to the COVID-19 situation was a good chance for companies to carry out upgrading works and prepare themselves for the rebound. As such, companies were allowed faster write-downs of their investments in plant machinery and for renovation and refurbishment costs incurred in 2020. Additional help was provided for badly impacted sectors such as the tourism, aviation, retail, point-to-point transport services and food services. To help companies retain and reskill workers, the Adapt and Grow programme was enhanced; the funding period to reskill workers was extended from three months to six months and more than 330,000 workers were expected to benefit from this scheme (Tang, 2020a).

Businesses received rebates projected at \$400 million, on corporate income taxes and various other taxes to improve cash flow. Companies were granted a rebate of 25 per cent tax payable or up to \$15,000 per company. Other measures to help badly affected sectors

were a 30 per cent tax rebate for the tourism sector; a 15 per cent property rebate for Changi Airport; three months' rental waivers for stallholders in NEA-managed hawkker centres and markets; a 15 per cent property tax rebate for qualifying commercial properties; and a \$77 million Point-to-Point Support Package to help taxi and private hire drivers.

Second, for the Transformation and Growth strategy, \$8.3 billion was set aside for businesses and start-ups over the next three years to facilitate innovation and digitalisation. The Transformation and Growth strategy would also include sums that were set aside in previous years. The \$8.3 billion was set aside for partnerships, helping start-ups, and the reskilling of workers.

The Transformation and Growth strategy first looked to the strengthening of digital partnerships in trade and investment, the avoidance of double-taxation, and also the development of partnerships between government, industry, and the research community. Next, more support was given for enterprises at each stage of growth; start-ups received additional funding from the government via the \$300 million Startup SG Equity while mature companies received support via the Enterprise Transform Package and other programmes (Quek, 2020). In addition, to encourage Singaporeans to embrace lifelong learning, all Singaporeans aged 25 and above received a one-time top-up of \$500 into their SkillsFuture Credit. Singaporeans aged 40 to 60 received an additional \$500 (Seow, 2020). Employers who hired middle-aged workers through a reskilling programme would receive 20 per cent salary support for six months, capped at \$6,000 in total. For seniors, the government said it would match every dollar of cash top-ups made to the CPF accounts of middle- and lower-income elderly (Oh, 2020a). Cash pay-outs under the Silver Support scheme were raised by 20 per cent or \$150 every quarter of the year. From 2021, under the Senior Worker Package, the government announced it would provide employers with wage offsets when they employed Singaporeans aged 55 and above. Support would taper down over time as the retirement and re-employment ages are gradually raised.

Third, to fight climate change, the government marked out three areas of support: rebates of up to 45 per cent for owners of fully electric vehicles (EVs), increasing the number of charging points for electric vehicles to 28,000 by 2030, and \$5 billion for the Coastal and Flood Protection Fund for urban solutions and sustainability (Y. Low, 2020). The government aimed to phase out internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles by 2040. Road tax for EVs would be revised to be less punitive and an EV Early Adoption Incentive would reduce the upfront cost difference between an EV and an ICE vehicle by \$20,000 (C. Tan, 2020).

An Assurance Package was also announced. It comprised \$6 billion set aside for the time when the government raises the goods and services tax, which would take place by the year 2025. The government said this would not happen in the year 2021 due to Singapore's weakened economy. Under the scheme, each Singaporean would receive cash pay-outs between \$700 to \$1,600 each year for five years (Lai, 2020b).

### *Resilience Budget*

As the pandemic progressed, further budget measures were rolled out.

On March 26, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced the supplementary Resilience Budget which contained additional support measures worth \$48.4 billion (Loh, 2020). The budget focused on saving jobs and supporting workers, helping businesses to overcome immediate challenges, and to strengthen economic and social resilience (K. Cheng, 2020).



The amount was at least double of what was set aside for the \$20.5 billion Resilience Package that was introduced to mitigate the effects of the 2009 Global Financial Crisis (R. Sim, 2020a). The Resilience Budget drew \$17 billion from the country's past reserves (Cheong, 2020a).

To help workers, the Job Support Scheme was enhanced with the government co-funding proportion rising up to 25–75 per cent of wages with a cap of \$4,600 per month (Tang, 2020b). For self-employed workers, the SEP Training Support Scheme hourly training allowances were increased to \$10 per hour and the training scheme was extended to December of 2020. Additionally, eligible self-employed workers with less means could receive up to \$1,000 per month income support from the government for nine months under a scheme called SIRS for Self-employed Person Income Relief Scheme.

The aviation, tourism and food services sectors were the most badly affected by the COVID-19 situation. Thus, the aviation sector was allocated a \$350 million enhanced aviation package for rebates on landing and parking charges, and rental relief (T. W. Toh, 2020). Firms in the aviation and tourism sectors received 75 per cent co-funding of wages per worker from the government, while those in the food services sector received up to 50 per cent co-funding. Mr Heng said \$90 million was set aside for the tourism industry to help it bounce back when the time is right.

#### *Solidarity Budget*

On April 6, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced a supplementary Solidarity Budget worth \$5.1 billion, and sought the use of an additional \$4 billion from the country's reserves (Chew, 2020a). This was needed to make up for the circuit breaker measures or "soft lockdown" that happened from April 6 to May 4. Out of the \$5.1 billion, \$4 billion went to additional support for businesses and \$1.1 billion was in the form of cash pay-outs.

On April 21, PM Lee announced the extension of the circuit breaker for four more weeks, until June 1. Due to the extension of the circuit breaker measures, Mr Heng announced additional support measures worth \$3.8 billion, to enhance the Solidarity Budget (Heng, 2020). The budget enhanced existing measures such as the Job Support Scheme and foreign worker levies and rebates. Both the Job Support Scheme of 75 per cent wage subsidy and the foreign worker levy waiver and rebates of \$750 a month per worker were extended from April to May 2020. Each Singaporeans also received an additional \$300 cash payment on top of the previous \$300 to \$900 cash payment (Gov.sg, 2020a).

#### *Fortitude Budget*

On May 26, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced a supplementary Fortitude Budget worth \$33 billion. This was in view of the badly weakened economy as the COVID-19 pandemic wore on and the growth forecast of GDP by MTI was cut further on May 26, from -1 to -4 per cent to -4 to -7 per cent (Tang, 2020c). President Halimah Yacob gave her in-principle support to draw another \$31 billion from the reserves (Audrey Tan, 2020), bringing the total draw on reserves financial year 2020 to \$52 billion. The Fortitude Budget enhanced existing measures either through increased wage support or duration of support.

#### *August and October Ministerial Statements*

On August 17 and October 5, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced the fifth and sixth sets of measures to support Singaporeans through COVID-19 by building on to the

existing budget measures. The Job Support Scheme was extended from December 2020 to March 2021. A new initiative, the \$1 billion Jobs Growth Initiative (JGI) was introduced to boost hiring of local workers. Companies that increased their headcount of local workers from September 2020 till the end of February 2021 would receive a wage subsidy of 25 per cent for local new hires under the age of 40, and 50 per cent for local new hires above the age of 40, for one year, subjected to a cap (CNA, 2020d).

The total cost of all four budgets and two measures amounted to \$188 billion or about 38 per cent of the nation's GDP of 2019, of which close to \$100 billion were used for support measures to deal with COVID-19 (Budget 2020, n.d.-b).

### *Reactions*

The suite of measures to cushion the impact of COVID-19 had the most reactions and mixed responses. On March 23, a poll by REACH, a government feedback agency, revealed that the Unity Budget generally received a positive response because respondents felt it would help businesses and individuals get by (D. Low, 2020). However, business owners of food and beverage companies felt that the budget aid was not sufficient (Co, 2020). A commentary on CNA noted that the budget aid would help businesses in the short term, but they would have to reskill workers and relook at their business models in the long term (Ng et al., 2020).

The government's draw from the nation's reserves to supply the COVID-19 budgets of 2020 stimulated debate on the principle of fiscal sustainability in doing so. MacPherson MP Tin Pei Ling asked if there would be enough for future generations as the government had drawn a significant amount from the reserves (Lai, 2020d). Both Faisal Manap and Dennis Tan, MPs of the Workers' Party (WP) asked if President Halimah knew how much was in the reserves before she gave her in-principle support (B. B. Tan, 2020). Finance Minister Heng later addressed the questions during the Fortitude Budget Round-Up Speech saying that the government would deploy fiscal instruments for prudent and equitable spending and that the President had full information before giving her support (Budget 2020, n.d.-a).

The digitisation movement for businesses in the Fortitude Budget received support from the ground. An analyst of Boston Consulting Group wrote in a commentary that the push for digitisation was the right move, but much would depend on SMEs to embrace the change: "COVID-19 has caused five years of transformation to be compressed into just five weeks and cultural resistance quickly falls away when it is a question of 'do or die'" (M. Tan, 2020).

### **Committee of Supply Debates**

On March 6, the House approved the Supply Bill after its Committee of Supply debate, which lasted over eight days. MPs filed more than 500 questions regarding the budget spending on the various issues concerning Singapore. There were five key areas of interest: COVID-19 immediate measures, digital literacy, climate change, mental health, and the process of partnership in the creation of policies.

#### *COVID-19 Immediate Measures*

MPs called for the release of the \$1.3 billion from the Jobs Support Scheme to be brought forward from end-July to end-May (Tay, 2020).

### *Digital Literacy*

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung announced that by 2028, all Secondary 1 students would receive their own personal learning devices to boost digital literacy skills. Popular responses to boost digital literacy skills included mandating coding as part of the educational curriculum. However, this was deemed simplistic as not everyone would end up working as a coder. Another issue was that without the right guidance, the personal learning devices could end up as another gadget that distracts the students. The right curriculum would have to be designed such that teaching and learning would be enhanced, said Minister Ong (J. Ang, 2020).

To ensure that each student is able to possess a personal learning device, the government added \$200 to students' Edusave accounts. Students from lower-income households would receive additional subsidies so that their out-of-pocket cost would be zero (J. Ang, 2020).

### *Climate Change*

The Centre for Climate Research Singapore projected that the sea level around Singapore would rise up by a metre by 2100. To address this, \$5 billion was allocated to the coastal and flood protection fund (Tham, 2020).

### *Mental Health*

Schools would devote more attention to mental wellness and peer support. Students would be taught when and how to seek help and develop care and empathy for people with mental health issues.

Caregivers of those with mental health conditions would also receive more support under a programme that involves hospitals and social service agencies. Senior Minister of State for Health Amy Khor said there would be a whole-of-government review of Singapore's mental healthcare system (Ho, 2020a).

### *Partnership in Creation of Policies*

The Budget speeches stressed the need for collaboration. The government set aside \$250 million for co-collaboration with citizens on community projects. More opportunities would be made available to Singaporeans from all walks of life to co-create and co-deliver initiatives to make Singapore a resilient nation. Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu said that "Singaporeans can and want to play a bigger role in shaping Singapore" (Ho, 2020a).

### **MTI Trade Networks**

On February 9, Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing explained that the government was meeting the nation's food supply needs via four ways in light of how supply chains were disrupted due to the pandemic: having a sizeable stockpile of non-perishable foods (e.g., rice); diversifying food sources by working with multiple suppliers; utilising Singapore's own local production capabilities; and working with suppliers both regionally and globally (Tee, 2020a). Even as Malaysia experienced its Movement Control Order (MCO) from March, Singapore managed to maintain food trade links with Malaysia (Yahoo New Singapore, 2021).

### **National Day "Rally" 2020**

After the General Election (GE) in July (this is discussed in a later section) there were some key policy debates, given the greater strength of opposition in Parliament.

Instead of a large National Day Rally, PM Lee delivered a speech on September 2 after the reopening of Parliament. He outlined four key areas of focus: Singapore's response to the pandemic, social safety nets, foreign workers, and politics (Gov.sg, 2020f).

### *Singapore's Response to COVID-19*

PM Lee described how Singapore managed to flatten the epidemic curve through contact tracing and testing, expansion of the healthcare system, mobilising the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and Home Team to assist in testing of foreign workers, and the implementation of the circuit breaker in April 2020. Overall, Singapore did relatively well, keeping fatality and infection rates low. However, the government could have done better in terms of discovering that asymptomatic people with COVID-19 could transmit the virus sooner, he said, and taking the necessary action including mandating of wearing of face masks sooner, as well as testing those under quarantine even when asymptomatic. He argued that Singapore had been able to deal with COVID-19 effectively because of the collaboration among the public service and political leadership with businesses and the public.

### *Social Safety Nets*

Next, PM Lee shared about the importance of strengthening social safety nets. He mentioned that existing social nets such as ComCare, Workfare, and Silver Support had been complemented by the Jobs Support Scheme and the COVID-19 Support Grant. He also shared the importance of identifying solutions to continue to meet the needs of the different groups of people — older workers and low-wage workers for instance — while ensuring that such solutions were fiscally sustainable.

### *Foreign Workers*

The issue of competition of jobs from foreigners became a hot topic in 2020, as many Singaporeans were worried about their job and income security in the pandemic. While the numbers of Employment Pass (EP) and S-Pass schemes had decreased with the onset of the public health crisis, PM Lee said it was still necessary to bring in foreign workers to grow the economy. He made assurances for mechanisms to ensure Singaporeans fair opportunities and workplace treatment, through various frameworks such as Tripartite Alliance for Fair & Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) and the Fair Consideration Framework.

### *Politics*

PM Lee shared that as Singapore evolves there would be several challenging issues that Singapore would need to deal with. In GE2020, many had voted for the opposition while expecting the PAP to remain in power — indicating that Singaporeans want more diversity, alternative voices, and checks and balances in Parliament. The government would continue to lead the discussion with Singaporeans on difficult policy issues so as to build a political consensus. He called on the opposition to work together with the government to serve Singapore and not just for partisan interests.

### **Debate on Minimum Wage and the Progressive Wage Model**

As the coronavirus pandemic wore on, Singaporeans grew to have a better appreciation of low-wage and low-skilled workers in essential services, resulting in debates on the minimum wage and the progressive wage model, or PWM (Lim & Yong, 2020). Ministers were

concerned whether worker productivity would be negatively affected and if it would be sustainable for businesses in the long term to have a minimum wage policy (Phua, 2020).

On September 3, WP MP Jamus Lim argued in his maiden speech for the adoption of a minimum wage policy and for more compassion in Singapore's policymaking. He acknowledged that while PWM was a form of minimum wage, it was not universal. Senior Minister (SM) Tharman Shanmugaratnam responded that the PWM was indeed a "minimum wage plus" policy that took a "sectoral approach". He also added that "no one had a monopoly over compassion" and advised against strawman arguments. Minister of State for Manpower and Education Ms Gan Siow Huang expressed concern that the implementation of a minimum wage policy would precipitate a loss of jobs. In response, Dr Lim said that minimum wage would have little impact on unemployment (Kurohi, 2020e). WP Leader of the Opposition (LO) Pritam Singh said the specific amount could be left to a panel of experts or the National Wages Council, to avoid polarisation on the issue (Yong, 2020).

### **Work Passes and Foreign Worker Policy**

On August 26, Manpower Minister Josephine Teo announced a hike in the qualifying income criteria for Employment Passes (EPs) and Special Passes (S passes) — from \$3,600 to \$3,900 for new applicants of EP holders, and \$2,300 to \$2,400 for S pass holders. She added that at the time, almost six in 10 locals (Singaporeans and Permanent Residents) were employed in PMET jobs, among the highest rates in the world. Also, for each EP holder, there were nearly seven locals in PMET roles (Seow, 2020).

On September 1, MPs debated the work pass policy and whether enough was being done to protect local PMETs from being displaced by foreigners. Minister Teo said that the number of local PMET jobs had grown by 35,000 per year from 2014 to 2019, while the number of EP and S pass holders grew by less than 9,000 per year. She indicated that the growth of EP and S pass holders had slowed down, which would imply that local PMETs were not being displaced (Lai, 2020g). MP Jamus Lim argued this was a misleading way to make conclusions on whether PMETs were being displaced or not (Daud, 2020).

Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) Leong Mun Wai of the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) voiced his party's support for an open economy, but also that the government should restore the balance of interests between Singaporeans and foreigners in light of concerns raised about discrimination against the former. While the government might think there were good reasons for the current foreign talent model, he felt some adjustments could be made on immigration policy and the way it was communicated.

He urged the government to lower the number of approvals for work passes and renewals in the short term and provide information on Singaporeans' buy-in on foreign talent policy. Additionally, he suggested having a ratio cap for foreigners and citizens, and for foreign PMETs to prove they have the relevant experience before being allowed to join Singapore's work force (Sin, 2020). Minister Teo said that imposing quotas on EPs was "not unthinkable" but was "probably unwise" (Zhang, 2020).

### **Foreign Worker Dormitories**

As anticipated — as it was part of the rationale for the circuit breaker — there was an explosion of COVID-19 cases in foreign worker dormitories. This brought to public attention the dense conditions that the workers lived in — there would be about 12 to 20 workers in one room — and the effect of their use of shared facilities (Ratcliffe, 2020). The media

published articles focused on the unhygienic conditions — from the toilets to the management of refuse (Sim & Kok, 2020). This galvanised the authorities and special teams to manage the outbreak to set those conditions right. Peak infection rates in dormitories hit 1,369 new cases a day (Ministry of Health, 2020b). Teams were set up to ramp-up testing, to raise their detection capabilities and effectively contain the transmission (Tee, 2020b).

The foreign worker dormitory cases drew criticism from netizens. At a press conference on April 21, Minister of Manpower Josephine Teo was asked why the authorities did not move the foreign workers out of their dormitories earlier for safe distancing and to curb transmission, and whether it was due to cost concerns. Minister Teo answered, “that isn't at all the case” and that the comment “does not reflect an understanding of the workers' own concern” as it was not so easy to ask workers to adopt the circuit breaker measures. It meant that they could not work, interact with their friends, or use the communal kitchens to cook for themselves. Minister Teo emphasised that the goal of breaking transmissions went beyond considerations of cost and measures such as the implementation of safe distancing (Ashley Tan, 2020). Many netizens were not convinced by Minister Teo's response and felt that the Ministry of Manpower had taken action much too late (Kathleen, 2020).

On June 8, the government announced that additional dormitories with higher standards would be built for migrant workers to reduce living density. By the end of 2020, new Quick Build Dormitories (QBDs), unused state properties, and additional Construction Temporary Quarters (CTQs) were created to house around 60,000 workers. This was the solution for the immediate problem. In the longer term, the government stated it would create Purpose-Built Dormitories (PBDs) to house up to 100,000 workers in place of the temporary housing created in 2020. The new PBDs would have amenities such as minimarts, barber services, indoor recreation facilities, and access to medical care and support. Additionally, new guidelines were released to improve the standards of living in the QBDs (Gov.sg, 2020c). They provide for:

- at least 6 sqm of living space per resident, instead of 4.5 sqm;
- a maximum of 10 beds per room with the use of single-deck beds only, instead of 12–16 beds per room with mostly double-deck beds;
- a toilet, bathroom and sink for every five beds, instead of every 15 beds;
- and 15 sick bay beds per 1,000 bed spaces, instead of 1 sick bay bed per 1,000 bed spaces.

### **White Paper for Gender Equality**

On September 20, at a virtual dialogue session, Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam announced that while Singapore had taken great strides to level the playing field for women over the past years, gender equality was still a work-in-progress. This was in reference to the numerous sexual offences cases that had emerged in the year (Chew & Lin, 2020). Further reviews on issues affecting women would be conducted with partners from the people and private sectors, and women's and youth groups, he announced. The sessions would be led by three female political office holders — Minister of State for Education and Social and Family Development Sun Xueling; Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry Low Yen Ling; and Parliamentary Secretary for Health Rahayu Mahzam. The ideas and suggestions obtained through the sessions

would be used to form a White Paper that would be tabled in Parliament in the first half of 2021 (T. M. Tan, 2020).

## **POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

### **The 2020 General Elections**

#### *Formation of Red Dot United by Former PSP Members*

During a virtual press on May 29, former Progress Singapore Party (PSP) members Ravi Philemon and Michelle Lee announced that they would form a new party called Red Dot United. When asked for their reason for forming a new party instead of joining existing parties, Ms Lee said, “There’s a need for a new perspective, new ideas and new methods to be brought into this space.” She said they aimed to “build a political-social platform and not just another political party” (Chew, 2020b). A third of the party consisted of former PSP members.

Ms Lee had resigned from PSP earlier in March to make more time for her family and she had said the party was large and took considerable amount of her time, dispelling rumours that she had left due to disagreements within the party. Mr Philemon cited reasons of wanting more calibrated growth in a party. He had resigned quite soon after a controversial saga also within the PSP where former member Daniel Teo circulated a video that alleged PSP had members who were proxies for foreign powers. Mr Philemon was included in the list of alleged members (Zheng, 2020a).

#### *Public Speculation and Release of the Electoral Boundaries*

Speculation on when the GE would be held began when it was revealed in September 2019 that the electoral boundaries committee had been formed. Speculation intensified when the report on the electoral boundaries was released on March 13, 2020. Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing said the release of the report was “not correlated” with when the GE would be called (H. M. Ang, 2020).

The recommendations in the electoral boundaries committee report, which were accepted by PM Lee, resulted in the following changes: from 16 group representation constituencies (GRCs) and 13 single member constituencies (SMCs) in 2015 when the previous general election was held, to 17 GRCs and 14 SMCs in 2020. Part of Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC was carved out to form the new Marymount SMC, while the remaining part of Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC absorbed some voters from Potong Pasir SMC. A new Sengkang GRC was formed that combined single-seat wards of Punggol East, parts of Sengkang West, and parts of Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC as it was argued that voter numbers had swelled in that region.

East Coast GRC took in Fengshan SMC to become a five-member GRC. West Coast GRC became a five-member GRC by taking in Hong Kah SMC and parts of Choa Chu Kang GRC.

The six-member GRCs of Ang Mo Kio and Punggol-Pasir Ris were downsized to five-member GRCs. The changes in boundaries resulted in 93 parliamentary seats compared with 89 seats in 2015.

### *Resistance to a COVID-19 GE*

As the country was still dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, several opposition parties criticised the prospect of a general election being held during that time. PSP's founding secretary-general Dr Tan Cheng Bock said it was "socially irresponsible" and suggested a delay of the elections until the pandemic was over even if it meant having the President form a caretaker government should the parliamentary term have lapsed by then.

In response, Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean stated it was unconstitutional to delay the election by having the President form a caretaker government as there is simply no such provision in the Constitution (I. Cheng, 2020).

Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) chairman Prof. Paul Tambyah, an infectious disease medical specialist, said the government should assure Singaporeans of their safety and have case numbers hold at single digits over several weeks before calling for the election. SDP's Secretary-General Dr Chee Soon Juan criticised the Government, reiterating Dr Tan's line of argument.

Analysts wondered if the PAP was seeking an electoral advantage by holding the GE during the pandemic as Singaporeans might vote for the incumbent in a "flight to safety".

PM Lee said in a media conference that he had hoped conditions relating to the pandemic would stabilise before the end of the government's term too, so that elections could be held under more normal circumstances, "[b]ut we have no certainty of that" was his conclusion. PM Lee assured the country that if the election had to be held before the pandemic was over, all necessary precautions would be taken so that parties could campaign effectively, and people could vote safely.

The Elections Department Singapore (ELD) released COVID-19 safety measures should an election be held that included SafeEntry check-ins, mandatory mask-wearing, specific time bands for voting in order to avoid overcrowding, and sanitisation of hands and wearing of gloves for voters (Chew, 2020c).

On May 4, the ELD also released the COVID-19 Special Arrangements that allowed Singaporeans with a fever of 37.5 degrees Celsius or on Stay Home orders at designated facilities to vote either at the facilities they were living in or at special polling stations from 7 to 8pm. Singaporeans on quarantine were not allowed to vote (Chew & Phua, 2020).

### *An Online Election*

On June 23, President Halimah Yacob dissolved Parliament, issued the Writ of Election and designated 30 June as Nomination Day and 10 July as Polling Day (R. Sim, 2020b).

On June 30, 11 political parties and an independent candidate made their Nomination Day speeches at their respective nomination centres. The speeches were broadcast online. All seats were to be contested.

Social media played a prominent role during the GE2020. Political parties were not allowed to have physical rallies due to the safe-distancing measures, and the public was advised to stay home as much as possible to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. Hence, all campaigning was done via mainstream news and social media platforms. The ELD introduced Constituency Party Broadcasts for GE2020 in addition to the usual Party-Political



Broadcasts to provide state support for the communication of candidates to voters under these unique circumstances.

As political parties campaigned and profiled their new candidates, two went through a “trial by internet” and a third became an overnight media sensation. The first was someone introduced as a candidate for Jurong GRC in the PAP camp on June 24 — Mr Ivan Lim. Soon after, netizens shared their negative experiences of dealing with him, highlighting his snobbish attitude and behaviour. Also, while Mr Lim had said he “was not involved in any of the Brazilian projects” for Keppel Offshore & Marine, which were mired in a bribery scandal, it was soon revealed that he was a project manager for the Espirito Santo Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSO) project there in 2007 (K. Wong, 2020). Netizens started an online petition on June 26 on Change.org titled “Petition to remove Ivan Lim from GE” and it garnered more than 11,000 signatures in one day (Lay, 2020).

On June 27, in the midst of the online firestorm, Mr Lim denied allegations and said he “wished to stay the course and to serve if elected” (Zheng, 2020b). On the afternoon of the same day, Mr Lim wrote a letter to PM Lee who was Secretary General of PAP, to announce that he would not run in the election and that the allegations against him were baseless. PM Lee publicly cautioned against a “trial by internet” of candidates and said the party would investigate the allegations after the polls (Awang, 2020).

Following that, comments from Lee Hsien Yang from PSP about the controversy implied that the PAP’s recruitment process might be not as thorough as it had been made out to be, seeing as it had missed the character flaws of its candidate. He said, “If the PAP knew about it they didn’t seem prepared for it. But if they didn’t know about it, then one should worry that the screening process is not as thorough as it can be.” Other PAP candidates with some background in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) were quick to establish their credentials and character as a result of the Ivan Lim saga — Shawn Huang who was in the Republic of Singapore Air Force for 19 years, and former Brigadier-General Desmond Tan who netizens said was humble, earning him the nickname “down-to-earth Desmond” (Cheung, 2020).

The second politician who generated controversy was opposition WP’s candidate Raeesah Khan. In her social media posts from February and May 2018, she had commented on the City Harvest Church case ruling, noting that “Singapore jailed minorities mercilessly, harassed mosque leaders but let corrupt church leaders who stole S\$50 million walk free, and questioned who had been paid” (CNA, 2020c). During GE2020, it was reported that someone had made a police report over her posts for allegedly causing enmity between different religious groups and races. The police classified the offence under Penal code 298A. Ms Raeesah made a public apology for her posts and said she was passionate about the issues she had raised, but regretted making such posts (Kurohi, 2020d). Following that, someone else made a police report over DPM Heng Swee Keat’s previous comment that Singapore was not ready for a non-Chinese PM, alleging that it too caused enmity between different racial groups. However, the Attorney General’s Chambers (AGC) said no offence was committed (Tan & Kurohi, 2020) in Heng’s case.

The incident generated a lot of public discourse on social media platforms. Many felt it was unfair to Ms Raeesah for such old material to be brought up, using the hashtags #IStandWithRaeesah and #InSolidarityWithRaesaah to show their support. A petition on Change.org garnered close to 20,000 signatures to let her campaign in peace and that investigations should only be conducted after the elections. In contrast, some netizens

agreed with the report that her social media posts were insensitive and divisive. More broadly, the incident opened up conversations on how Singapore manages conversations on race relations and if Singaporeans felt there was a need for change.

During the televised “Singapore Votes 2020 — The Political Debate”, members from four parties, PAP, WP, PSP, and SDP, debated on July 1. The face-off between PAP’s Vivian Balakrishnan and WP’s Jamus Lim generated a lot of buzz online. Dr Balakrishnan noted that the manifesto brought by the WP was something the PAP would come up with, and he called the WP “PAP-lite” (Thet, 2020b). In Mr Lim’s closing speech, he clarified that the WP was not trying to deny the PAP a strong mandate, but a “blank cheque”. He added that the ruling party “does not have a monopoly on the best ideas on how we should bring society forward” (Kurohi, 2020c).

#### *The Use of Protection from Online Falsehoods Manipulation Act (POFMA)*

On June 9, it was announced that top senior civil servants were authorised to use the Protection from Online Falsehoods Manipulation Act (POFMA) from the day the Writ was issued to the end of Polling Day. Soon after, corrective directives were issued regarding PSP Alex Tan’s post on his Facebook page, “State News Singapore”, that published falsehoods about the cross-border travel arrangements between Singapore and Malaysia; and on Peoples Voice (PV) leader Lim Tean’s statement on the government’s expenditure on foreign students. Mr Lim was previously issued corrective directives for similar statements in 2019 (Low & Wong, 2020).

The second set of corrective directives targeted falsehoods about the government wishing to achieve a 10 million population in Singapore. One such instance on Facebook stated that the Urban Redevelopment Authority “plans to build underground infrastructure ready for 10 million population”, while a second instance on Facebook claimed that Dr Cheong Koon Hean, at the time Chief Executive of the Housing and Development Board, had stated the same at the IPS-Nathan Lectures 2018 (Y. H. Goh, 2020b).

Lastly, five corrective directives were issued to the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS), CNA, and the New Naratif regarding posts on Prof. Paul Tambyah’s statement that the Multi-Ministry Taskforce did not consult with medical professionals on how to handle COVID-19, and that MOM actively discouraged the testing of foreign workers for COVID-19 (Choo, 2020). Prof. Tambyah was critical of the use of POFMA and said that it was a “tactic that the ruling party uses all the time” (Oh, 2020c).

#### *Key Themes in GE2020*

A number of themes emerged during the GE2020 period on televised debates, in campaigning content of the political parties, and in social media posts by netizens. They were the government’s COVID-19 response, the strengthening of social safety nets, the 10 million population target, denying the PAP a “blank cheque”, the possibility of an opposition wipeout, and the value of the NCMP scheme.

#### *The Government’s COVID-19 Response*

In the run-up to the election, various opposition parties criticised the government’s response to COVID-19, citing the policy changes on mask-wearing, the timing of the closure of schools, and the large number of cases in the foreign worker dormitories.

These were mostly led by SDP's Prof. Tambyah, who alleged that the government's advice on mask-wearing and testing of foreign workers were due to concerns on shortages and constraints on resources rather than medical advice. On June 5, WP's Pritam Singh called for a review on the government's COVID-19 response, citing the changes in directives. However, he nuanced his arguments to stress that these were aimed at identifying the lessons for the future and that his party's position was to put politics aside for Singapore to overcome COVID-19 with a "unity of purpose" (Kurohi, 2020b).

At a walkabout in Jalan Besar GRC, PV leader Lim Tean said that Manpower Minister Josephine Teo was responsible for the outbreak in the dormitories, which was "one of the greatest failures in 4G leadership" (C. Wong, 2020). He criticised the government again during his party's political constituency broadcast on July 5, decrying the government for not acting with speed and decisiveness in responding to COVID-19.

### *Strengthening of Social Safety Nets*

As Singapore battled COVID-19, a major concern was job and income security. During the July 1 political debate held by the main broadcaster Mediacorp, opposition members raised their concerns on the limitations of existing policies regarding the hiring of foreign PMETs, the progressive wage model, and inadequacy of financial support from the government. PAP representative Dr Vivian Balakrishnan acknowledged that the issues raised were important and pointed to the schemes and policies the PAP had already introduced to address them.

On July 8, Minister of Social and Family Development (MSF) Desmond Lee said at a PAP media conference that Singapore's social safety nets were strengthened amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. He acknowledged the struggles of vulnerable and low-income groups who had been hit the hardest by the outbreak and outlined the support schemes the government had in place to help them. An estimated of 550 volunteers from SG Cares Community Networks worked with social service officers to support such groups through the crisis (W. L. Toh, 2020).

### *10 Million Population Target*

The 10 million population target first appeared during "Singapore Votes 2020 — The Political Debate", televised on Mediacorp's Channel 5 on July 1. SDP's Dr Chee Soon Juan questioned PAP's Dr Vivian Balakrishnan on whether the PAP was aiming for a target population of 10 million and referred to a *Straits Times* article that reported Mr Heng Swee Keat citing former chief planner Liu Thai Ker who had said in 2014 that "Singapore should plan for 10 million people for it to remain sustainable in the long term" (Laiu, 2020). Dr Chee also asked if the government was planning to boost the size of the population by having more foreign PMETs in Singapore. Dr Balakrishnan rebutted these points saying that the "government doesn't have a target for the population" and that Dr Chee's statements were falsehoods. Mr Heng had quoted Mr Liu during a 2019 Nanyang Technological University student union ministerial forum when the students asked him about Singapore's Population White Paper (Ho, 2020b).

After the debate, the SDP claimed they were successful in their campaign to curb the PAP's goal to build up the population to 10 million people as they got the members of the ruling party to deny it was their plan to do so (Laiu, 2020). The PAP hit back and said that SDP's campaign slogan "No to a population of 10 million" was pointless as there was no such plan, and that the integrity of the party was questionable (Oh, 2020b).

The government also released two online posts on its “Factually” webpage, to clarify the population target issue. Both articles said that there was no population target and that Singapore was unlikely to reach 6.9 million by 2030 (Gov.sg, 2020d). One of the articles further clarified the difference between living density and population density (Gov.sg, 2020e).

### *The NCMP Scheme and Denying the PAP a “Blank Cheque”*

In response to the blank cheque analogy mentioned earlier, Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing said it was not a “correct characterisation” of what the general election was about because the ruling party had to be accountable to the people and electorate. Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Indranee Rajah also highlighted the existence of the non-constituency member of parliament (NCMP) scheme which meant that “no matter what happens, the Constitution guarantees at least 12 opposition seats at the minimum.” She added that the NCMPs have equal voting rights as elected MPs (Cheong, 2020b).

The NCMP scheme, established in 1984, offers a number of minimum seats not filled by duly elected opposition politicians to the best losers in an election. That minimum number was raised from nine to 12 in the year 2016.

### *Risk of an Opposition Wipeout*

On 28 June, at a WP media conference to unveil the party’s manifesto, Pritam Singh said that there was a real risk of a wipeout at the GE. He had mentioned the term in Parliament earlier in the year.

In response, PAP party chief Lee Hsien Loong said he did not see the outcome as realistic and that it was a “tactic” by the WP. He described the WP as “overconfident” in the GE2015 when its members said they hoped to form the government one day, but “voters showed that they were not ready for it.” PM Lee said the opposition party was trying to “do the opposite” this time, by saying that they would lose, and through reverse psychology, have people vote for them (Ong, 2020).

Similarly, Mr Heng Swee Keat said the WP was using the prospect of an opposition wipeout to sway voters and win more seats in Parliament. This could weaken the strong mandate that government needs to face the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr Heng questioned the WP’s stand on the NCMP scheme as they had taken up NCMP seats in the past. He urged voters to consider the motives of WP and ask that WP clarify its stand on the NCMP seats (Lai, 2020e). WP’s chief Pritam Singh said its stand was already out in the public domain and the PAP could simply look at that — the WP was reluctant to take up NCMP seats because its members felt that the voices of NCMPs could be ignored. The WP asked voters to “reflect on why the PAP was so magnanimous in offering NCMP seats” (Koh & Kurohi, 2020).

The call to deny the PAP a “blank cheque” and the fear of an opposition wipeout increased discussions on the NCMP scheme and its role in Singapore’s political development.

### *GE2020 Results*

On July 10, Polling Day, voters were to cast their votes from 8am to 8pm. Towards the final hour, the ELD announced that voting would be extended till 10pm because some voters had not completed their voting. The last-minute extension of voting hours drew flak from opposition parties SDP, PV, and PSP who said it was “highly irregular”, “outrageous and

totally out of order”, and that the extension “compromised the integrity of the process” ( Goh & Low, 2020).

In the early hours of July 11, the results for the GE2020 were finalised. The PAP won a clear mandate with 61.2 per cent of the votes, although this was lower than the 65 per cent the party had hoped for (Lai, 2020f). It won 83 seats out of the 93 with 10 seats falling to the WP. The WP was able to hold Hougang SMC and Aljunied GRC, and secure the new four-member Sengkang GRC. The GE2020 also had the highest voter turnout compared with previous years, with a turnout of 95.81 per cent of the registered voters.

Other closely watched seats included West Coast GRC with PAP’s S. Iswaran’s team winning 51.7 per cent against PSP’s Dr Tan Cheng Bock’s team; East Coast GRC with PAP’s Heng Swee Keat team winning 53.4 per cent against WP’s Nicole Seah’s team, Bukit Batok SMC with PAP’s Murali Pillai winning 54.8 per cent against SDP’s Dr Chee Soon Juan, and Bukit Panjang SMC with PAP’s Liang Eng Hwa winning 53.7 per cent against SDP’s Prof. Tambyah.

#### *Appointment of the Leader of the Opposition*

During the PAP’s post-election media conference that early morning, PM Lee said the results indicated the public’s “clear desire for diversity of voices in Parliament”. He announced that he would invite WP’s Pritam Singh to take up the role of “Leader of Opposition”, Singapore’s first.

The duties of a LO were spelt out months later and these include leading the opposition in presenting alternative views in parliamentary debates, leading and organising scrutiny of the government’s positions and actions in Parliament, and being consulted on the appointment of opposition Members to Select Committees (Parliament of Singapore, n.d.).

Analysts said the move was a turning point in Singapore’s political scene but also a double-edged sword for the opposition as expectations for the parties’ performance would be raised (Chew, 2020d). Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said that the outcome for GE2020 was good as it reflected a desire for a new balance in politics (Koh, 2020).

#### *Cabinet Reshuffle*

On July 25, PM Lee announced Singapore’s new cabinet and said it sought to balance continuity, exposure and renewal and “be a team that leads Singapore through the current public health and economic crisis and into the future.” Various office holders retired, new office holders were appointed, and existing members in the office were moved around.

The three office holders who retired were Mr Khaw Boon Wan who was Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure and Transport Minister, who did not run in GE2020; Mr Sam Tam who was Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Social and Family Development, and chairman of REACH; and Dr Tan Wu Meng who was a Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Industry. Six office holders were promoted and there were seven new office holders.

What was in the public’s mind was whether there would be any change to DPM Heng being the next PM given the outcome of GE2020 as many were expecting him to take over the reins in the new term (Iwamoto, 2020). At the media conference to announce the changes, when asked if the 4G leaders had reviewed their support of Mr Heng, Minister Chan Chun Sing said, “We are entirely focused on helping our country overcome the economic

challenges and saving the jobs at this point in time” and “we have no plans to do otherwise and no discussion on any change in plan” (Mahmud, 2020). The following day, at a doorstep interview, Foreign Minister Balakrishnan said that the 4G ministers fully backed DPM Heng as PM-designate (Jaipragas, 2020).

Lee Hsien Loong remains the Prime Minister and said that he intended to see Singapore through the COVID-19 pandemic as its leader. In response to a reporter’s question on timeline for leadership succession, PM Lee said it depended on the situation: “Nobody can tell how the COVID situation will develop or how long the economic crisis will be,” he said. PM Lee, who was currently 68, had previously said that he wished to retire before he reached the age of 70 (Mahmud, 2020).

### **Defamation Suit over Leong Sze Hian’s Facebook Post**

On October 6, PM Lee and Mr Leong Sze Hian attended a hearing regarding a defamation suit against Mr Leong. Mr Leong had shared a Facebook post by Malaysian publication, *The Coverage*, in December 2018 that alleged that PM Lee was involved in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. PM Lee initiated legal action a month later (Lim, 2020).

Mr Leong said he was asked to take down the post within six hours as it had violated the Internet Code of Conduct. After taking down the post, Mr Leong was given the opportunity to apologise but he did not do so.

PM Lee was accused of picking on Mr Leong for being a “staunch government” critic. PM Lee testified on October 6 that while Mr Leong may have been a “thorn in our side in a small way for a very long time”, he had not sued the blogger for libel in order to “silence critics”.

Mr Leong declined to take the stand as his lawyer, Lim Tean, said he did not think it was necessary as there was no case to answer (Lam, 2020). PM Lee’s lawyer, Davinder Singh, felt it was ironic for Mr Leong to not take the stand for cross-examination, effectively silencing himself and letting Singaporeans down ( Tan & Ang, 2020). The libel suit was adjourned to November 30 (Kurohi, 2020f).

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