

The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2021

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a review of key policy and political developments in Singapore in 2021. These were significantly influenced by the country's continued response to the challenges and consequences brought about by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic which was first detected in January 2020.

Since then, Singapore's economy has recovered substantially as certain sectors rebounded. The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) projected Singapore to experience GDP growth of 4.0 to 6.0 per cent in 2021 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020). On February 17 2022, MTI announced that the Singapore economy grew by a stronger than projected 7.6 per cent in 2021. The manufacturing sector experienced growth of 13.2 per cent when compared to growth of 7.5 per cent in 2020. The construction sector expanded by 20.1 per cent from a 38.4 per cent contraction the previous year. The services sector grew by 5.6 per cent in a reversal of 2020's 5.1 per cent contraction. The only sub-sector that contracted was the administrative and support services one (MTI, 2022, p.3).

Total unemployment continued to fall in 2021 -- the annual overall unemployment rate decreased to 2.7 per cent while the annual resident unemployment rate was 3.5 per cent. In comparison, the figures for 2020 were 3 and 4.1 per cent, respectively. MTI announced that the overall unemployment rate in Q1 2021 stood at 2.9 per cent while figures for Q2, Q3 and Q4 were 2.7, 2.6 and 2.4 per cent, respectively (MOM, 2021a).

Singapore's core inflation rose to 2.1 per cent on a year-on-year basis in December 2021 while its overall inflation jumped to 4 per cent (CNA, 2022).

Singapore's total population contracted by 4.1 per cent and stood at 5.45 million in June 2021. The citizen population decreased 0.7 per cent to 3.50 million. The citizen population continued to age with 17.6 per cent of the population aged 65 and above. This was a marked increase from the 16.8 per cent recorded in June 2020. The permanent resident (PR) population also decreased by 6.2 per cent to 0.49 million. The decreases observed in the wider population were a result of certain factors including more citizens and PRs remaining overseas for a year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Similarly, the non-resident population decreased by 10.7 per cent to 1.47 million. This was caused by a reduction in foreign employment between June 2020 and June 2021 due to travel restrictions (National Population and Talent Division et al., 2021, p.3).

POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

COVID-19 Pandemic Developments

The beginning of 2021 saw Singapore emerge strongly from the COVID-19 pandemic that had afflicted the world in 2020. This was due to the effective measures that Singapore had implemented. According to the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity's World Index of Healthcare Innovation, Singapore ranked ninth in its COVID-19 policy response with Taiwan being in first place followed by Japan, Hong Kong, Norway, New Zealand, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Austria. This was gauged according to metrics that included the number of fatalities per million, lockdown stringency, and global integration or isolation (Roy, 2020). *Time* magazine ranked Singapore second after Taiwan in terms of its healthcare management, political response, and financial policy response to COVID-19 (Bremmer, 2020).

On December 14, 2020, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong applauded the efforts of Singaporeans in containing the virus. He stressed that COVID-19 had not been defeated yet and urged people to remain vigilant. PM Lee also revealed that the Singapore government was working hard to procure vaccines. Vaccines that were being acquired included Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech. PM Lee declared that the national strategy was to first vaccinate healthcare workers, frontline workers, the elderly and the vulnerable before moving on to vaccinate the rest of the population. The goal was to inoculate a vast majority of Singaporeans by the end of 2021 (PMO, 2020b). On the same day, Singapore became the first Asian country to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (Geddie & Daga, 2020) the first shipment of which arrived on December 21 (H. M. Chew, 2020b).

Despite these positive developments, the government urged caution. On December 19, 2020, the Ministry of Health (MOH) reported an outbreak of 13 COVID-19 cases among individuals who had served their Stay-Home Notice (SHN) at the Mandarin Orchard hotel. This was a reminder to the public of the need to continue practising safe-distancing and sanitation measures (MOH, 2020). Singapore entered Phase 3 (Safe Nation) on December 28. This mainly involved the resumption of social, cultural, religious and business gatherings with limited crowd sizes to arrest the emergence of large clusters of infection (REACH, 2020). Capacity limits on premises and worship services were raised to 250 people in zones of up to 50 people each. Group gathering numbers also increased from five to eight people with households being allowed to receive eight visitors (H. M. Chew, 2020a).

As restrictions were gradually lifted, the drive to vaccinate the population intensified. This culminated on December 30 with Senior Staff Nurse Sarah Lim from the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) being the first person to be vaccinated (Chong, 2020). The government also began setting up vaccination centres and started the process of immunising the population from COVID-19 throughout the entirety of 2021 (M. Z. Lim, 2020).

Waves of Infection

In January 2021, Singapore experienced a resurgence in COVID-19 cases. On January 22, MOH reported 15 new cases of COVID-19 infections. These added to the 191 known confirmed cases that were detected from January 16 to 22 (MOH, 2021a). On January 24, 48 imported cases were discovered. This was the highest number of cases since March 23, 2020. Forty-one individuals had no symptoms and were only detected through detailed screening and surveillance. Furthermore, no new cases in the community and workers' dormitories were reported (Iau, 2021).

The rise in the number of local cases compelled the government to tighten safe management measures on January 26. The 8-person cap on household visitors remained while the pilot for shortlisted nightclubs and karaoke outlets to remain open to local residents as well as work pass holders who tested negative for COVID-19, was suspended. The commencement of the National School Games slated for February was also postponed. Other measures such as mask mandates and surveillance testing for stallholders, shop owners, and people in the Food & Beverage (F&B) industry were unchanged. These were part of an active effort to arrest the spread of the large clusters during Chinese New Year (gov.sg, 2021a).

Throughout February and March 2021, the number of community and dorm infections remained low. By March 31, it was reported that the total number of COVID-19 cases in Singapore had crossed 61,000 with 30 deaths (MOH, 2021c). The situation was to remain stable until April.

On April 27, a nurse at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) tested positive. Eventually, this resulted in a TTSH cluster with 48 cases. This was the first of many big clusters in 2021. More specifically, it was the first cluster of the new B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant that had first been identified in India in late 2020 (Teo, 2021). The Delta variant wave began to engulf Singapore.

Another cluster of 108 cases broke out on May 5 2021 as an 88-year-old cleaner at Changi Airport Terminal 3 tested positive. This led to an exponential increase in COVID-19 infections as the Changi Airport cluster became Singapore's largest active cluster (V. Lim, 2021). On May 8, the government initiated a slew of measures to curtail the spread of the Delta variant. There was a reduction in group sizes from five to two people and the size of large events or activities (MOH, 2021d). On May 13, the authorities closed Jewel Changi Airport as well as Terminals 1 and 3 for two weeks (V. Lim, 2021).

Phase 2 (Heightened Alert)

As a result of the threat from the airport cluster, on May 14, co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF) on COVID-19 and Minister for Finance, Mr Lawrence Wong, declared that restrictions would be tightened from May 16 to June 13 under Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) protocols. Indoor "mask-off" activities such as dine-ins at F&B establishments were disallowed. Other activities that were also ceased included strenuous indoor exercise classes as well as individual and group sports. Personalised services that required masks to be removed such as facials, saunas and music classes were prohibited. Work-from-Home (WFH) became the default arrangement yet again (gov.sg, 2021e).

On May 15, the authorities implemented tighter infection control measures, segregating tourists arriving from high-risk countries or regions from those flying to Singapore from low-risk ones by designating different piers, testing and immigration areas. Airport workers were also to be tested every seven days (V. Lim, 2021).

On May 19, schools shifted to home-based learning, or HBL (MOE, 2021).

On May 21, passengers from high-risk areas were required to do on-arrival antigen rapid tests (ARTs) in addition to polymerase chain reactions (PCR) tests. On May 23, airport workers in higher-risk roles had to take an additional ART between their seven-day routine tests (V. Lim, 2021).

On June 10, the MTF announced a two-step return to Phase Three (Heightened Alert) with effect from June 14. People could gather in groups of five but had to continue to work from home (J. Lim, 2021). Restrictions on dining-in were lifted on June 21 but limited to groups of two, in view of another looming cluster at the Bukit Merah Market and Food Centre (MOH, 2021e). The market was to remain closed until June 26 (Oh, 2021a).

On June 24, the MTF set out a road map to treat COVID-19 as an endemic disease when it would be accepted as being present in the population at a more stable and less virulent state (Lai, 2021e). This ultimately meant that Singapore would have to learn to live with the virus. This “new normal” would encompass home recovery for mild symptoms as well as independent self-testing. The focus was to be on health outcomes rather than daily infection numbers. Travel to countries where COVID-19 was endemic was also targeted (Gan et al., 2021).

However, this ideal scenario was deferred by the outbreak of more Delta clusters. On July 12, MOH drew attention to a series of infections in Singapore amongst Vietnamese social hostesses who had frequented karaoke lounges and clubs that were now operating as F&B outlets. Three venues that were of interest were the Supreme KTV at Far East Shopping Centre, Empress KTV at Tanglin Shopping Centre, and Club Dolce at the Balestier Point commercial centre (Kamil, 2021). A total of 253 linked cases would eventually emerge in this cluster (S. Tan, 2022, p.101).

On July 16, as new COVID-19 cases spiked, the MTF fine-tuned dining rules, which further differentiated between the people who were vaccinated and those who were not. Unvaccinated people who tested negative for Covid-19 and fully vaccinated people could continue to eat in groups of up to five (gov.sg, 2021f). This would take effect from July 19.

On the same day, new clusters of COVID-19 cases were identified at several wet markets and food centres. Seven were linked to Jurong Fishery Port and Hong Lim Market & Food Centre. Another seven were traced to a cluster at the Khoi Grill & Hotpot restaurant at Jalan Besar (D. Choo, 2021b). Twenty-five cases were linked to Haig Road Market & Food Centre and 10 to Chong Pang Market were also discovered. Haig Road Market & Food Centre and Chong Pang Market were closed from July 21 to August 4 (MOH, 2021g).

The authorities closed Jurong Fishery Port and Hong Lim Market & Food Centre from July 17 to 31 in a bid to disrupt the rate of transmission and sanitise the facilities. Khoi Grill & Hotpot Restaurant was shut down from July 16 to 30 (D. Choo, 2021b). The clusters at Jurong Fishery Port and Hong Lim Market & Food Centre would grow rapidly and increase to 1,155 cases (S. Tan, 2022, p.101).

On July 18, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Ms Grace Fu announced that Singapore had switched to alternative supply routes in light of the COVID-19 clusters at Jurong Fishery Port. This would allow the city-state to avoid disruptions to its food supply chains and fulfil its demand for fresh seafood (Tan & Tan, 2021).

On July 19, MOH reported that it had detected cases at Chong Boon Market & Food Centre, Albert Centre Market & Food Centre, Ang Mo Kio Central Market & Food Centre, 630 Bedok Reservoir Road Market & Food Centre, 497 Jurong West Street 41 Market, 505 Jurong West Street 52 Market, Kim Keat Palm Market & Food Centre, Mayflower Wet Market & Food Centre, Teck Ghee Market & Food Centre, 146 Teck Whye Avenue Market and Tekka Centre (MOH, 2021f).

On July 20, the MTF announced a return to Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) from July 22 to August 18 (gov.sg, 2021g), and superseded those that were introduced on July 19. Group sizes were reduced from five to two, and dine-in at all F&B establishments were prohibited once again. TraceTogether check-ins were mandated at markets and hawker centres (gov.sg, 2021g).

During the same press conference, Assoc Prof Kenneth Mak, Director of Medical Services at the Ministry of Health, suggested that Jurong Fishery Port's cluster cases were imported from Indonesia through fishing boats and multiple points. However, he said there was no evidence to suggest that the transmission was occurring through contaminated fish. Rather, it had taken probably taken place through other sources (P. Ang, 2021). The clusters at the KTV nightclubs and Jurong Fishery Port were linked through a KTV hostess who worked at the port. Some of the workers there were also patrons of the lounges (S. Wong, 2021). The hostess had been exposed to COVID-19 through someone from Indonesia who had delivered food supplies through the port.

On July 22, the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) announced that the National Day Parade (NDP) would be postponed to August 21 with a ceremonial parade being held on August 9. In this vein, the National Day Rally was postponed to August 29 (M. Z. Lim, 2021b).

On August 6, MOH announced that it expected 70 per cent of the population to be fully vaccinated by August 9. This was to be part of a transition to "Covid Resilience". From August 10, there was a relaxation of certain Phase 2 measures; this was to continue till August 19 provided the situation remained stable (MOH, 2021h). Minister for Health Mr Ong Ye Kung announced that the plan to ease restrictions followed a four-step process, namely, the Preparatory Stage, Transition Stage A, Transition Stage B, and COVID-19 Resilient Nation (Lai, 2021d).

The Preparatory Stage was expected to start after National Day and last until early September. This involved Singapore making crucial adjustments to healthcare protocols, rules on social activities, and travel plans that would prepare Singaporeans to live with COVID-19.

The Transition Stage A was to begin in early September and coincide with 80 per cent of Singapore's population to be fully vaccinated. If Singapore could keep the number of COVID cases under control with its healthcare system not being overstretched, the government would further open up its economy, social activities and cross-border travel.

If the situation remained stable, Singapore could consider opening up to Transition Stage B and finally become a COVID-19 Resilient Nation (Y. Low, 2021b). As a result, hospital discharge protocols were modified to allow fully vaccinated individuals to be released after 10 days if they tested COVID-19 negative or had very low viral loads. Others who were not in the clear would be monitored and discharged after 14 days of isolation, as had been the norm. Modifications were also made to dine-in regulations. From August 10, once again, only vaccinated people could dine-in in groups of five at F&B outlets. Business owners were obligated to check patrons' vaccination statuses. Seating arrangements at hawker centres and coffee shops were limited to two persons per table. Concessions were given to unvaccinated people to dine in, provided that they adhered to the two-person cap.

Event sizes and capacity limits were raised for religious services, cinemas, live performances, and spectator sports events. A limit of 500 people was stipulated, provided that all the attendees were vaccinated. If not, only 50 attendees were allowed without a pre-event test (PET). Wedding solemnisations were subjected to the same cap of 500 people while the

numbers at receptions could be expanded to 250 attendees with groups of five people per table. The 500-person limit for religious services, cinemas, live performances, spectator sports events and wedding receptions was to be raised to 1,000 people from August 19. The operating capacity for attractions, cruises, museums and public libraries was raised from 25 to 50 per cent. Shopping malls and showrooms had their occupancy limits raised from 16 sqm per person of gross floor area to 10 sqm per person. WFH measures were also loosened; 50 per cent of employees were allowed to return to work, and temperature-screening requirements were removed (MOH, 2021h).

On August 8, PM Lee delivered his National Day message stating that Singaporeans could look forward to a gradual opening of the economy (PMO, 2021b). This was followed by a scaled-down ceremonial parade on August 9 at the Marina Bay Floating Platform. Six hundred uniformed participants and 200 people from nine uniform groups and 12 social and economic organisations were involved in the muted celebrations (Lim & Liew, 2021).

A few days later, on August 14, two new clusters at Bishan and Sengkang bus interchanges were detected (C. Tan, 2021a). By September 7, 537 cases would also be linked to Tampines, Boon Lay, Toa Payoh, Clementi, Jurong East and Punggol bus interchanges (MOH, 2021i).

On August 21, the National Day Parade took place with 1,000 attendees including bus drivers, supermarket cashiers and hawkers (Ang et al., 2021).

Phase 2 measures remained in place throughout September. On September 1, Changi Airport's Terminals 1 and 3 were made accessible to the public again, after being closed for more than 100 days (Toh, 2021). Things looked to be getting better. However, this was not to last very long. On September 6, clusters linked to the Orient Goldsmiths & Jewellers staff, Changi General Hospital and Bugis Junction were detected (Yahoo, 2021). The MTF advised Singaporeans to minimise social gatherings and only leave their homes for essential activities (MSF, 2021a). On September 17, Minister for Health Mr Ong warned Singaporeans to expect an accelerated surge in COVID-19 cases (C. Wong, 2021).

Phase 3 (Stabilisation)

On September 24, MOH announced that Singapore could face about 3,200 cases daily in the subsequent two weeks leading up to October. At that stage, there were nearly 1,600 cases a day. In this vein, co-chair of the MTF, Minister for Trade and Industry Mr Gan Kim Yong stated that the new wave of COVID-19 cases threatened to overwhelm Singapore's healthcare system. This was happening despite a shift to community and home care for those infected with COVID-19. As a result, the MTF initiated Phase 3 (Stabilisation) from September 27 to October 24. Dining-in at F&B outlets and social gatherings was once again reduced to groups of two. HBL for primary and special education schools was extended to October 7. WFH returned to being the default arrangement (H. M. Ang, 2021a).

The tolerance levels of Singapore's healthcare system were the government's main priority for the month of October. On October 2, Mr Ong Ye Kung announced that the capacity at hospitals and treatment facilities was being expanded (The Straits Times, 2021c). On October 9, PM Lee said that the Delta variant had altered Singapore's "zero COVID" strategy to a "living with COVID-19" one. He noted that the healthcare system remained under stress and that a "new normal" was around three to six months away (PMO, 2021d). On October 10, home recovery became the default for most COVID-19 patients (MOH, 2021k). Healthcare protocols were simplified by allowing people to go on with their lives after a fixed

amount of time (MOH, 2021i).

On October 20, the MTF announced that Phase 3 would be extended to November 21 (MOH, 2021m). On the same day, 18 deaths were reported — the highest number of fatalities in a single day up till that point (Reuters, 2021b). Seven days later, the number of new cases per day in Singapore exceeded 5,000 for the first time. More specifically, there were 5,324 new cases with 66 being critically ill (CNA, 2021a).

On November 1, Senior Minister of State for Health Mr Janil Puthucheary told parliament that Singapore could see about 2,000 COVID-19 deaths a year despite the availability of the best possible medical care. Most of the victims would be the elderly and those who were already unwell (MOH, 2021o).

On November 10, fully vaccinated people from the same household were allowed to dine out in groups of five. However, dining at hawker centres and coffee shops was still limited to groups of two regardless of vaccination status (Y. H. Goh, 2021).

On November 22, Phase 3 ended with fully vaccinated people from different households being allowed to dine in groups of five. Social gathering sizes and the number of visitors per household was raised from two to five. WFH requirements remained in place. A day later, groups of five fully vaccinated people could eat at hawker centres and coffees shops after vaccination status checks (Lai, 2021f).

On November 26, a new SARS-CoV2 Omicron variant was reported from South Africa (WHO, 2021).

On December 1, it was reported that Singapore had seen more than 266,049 cases of infection including 726 deaths (C. Tan, 2021d). This was followed by an MTF announcement on December 14, which warned Singaporeans to prepare for an Omicron wave. Sixteen cases were detected. However, more people could return to work from January 1 2022 onwards (MTI, 2021b).

Mass Vaccination

Even as Singapore dealt with recurring waves of infection, the drive to vaccinate a vast majority of the population took centre stage. From December 30, 2020 onwards, the mass vaccination of frontline workers and healthcare workers at NCID took place, which included Home Team officers and staff at Ren Ci Bukit Batok nursing home (M. Z. Lim, 2020). On January 13, 2021, Minister Lawrence Wong announced that elderly Singaporeans could receive their jabs earlier than expected through a prioritised booking system (Baharudin, 2021a).

Following this trend, 37,000 frontline workers in the aviation and maritime sectors began their vaccination exercise at Changi Airport Terminal 4 and Raffles City Convention Centre on January 18, with 13,000 registering to get their first dose. More vaccination centres were to be set up by the end of February (Kok, 2021). On January 25, 80,000 land transport workers began their vaccination programme. Employees of bus and train operators including bus captains were among the first 12,000 workers to be offered their first dose (D. Low, 2021).

On January 27, senior citizens who had signed up for a pilot programme received their first doses at the nearest polyclinics or vaccination centre in the precincts they lived (Yuen, 2021a). These measures were implemented through consultation with the Expert Committee On COVID-19 Vaccination that recommended frontline workers, healthcare workers, and

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those who were most vulnerable to severe complications from COVID-19 being vaccinated first (M. Z. Lim, 2020).

On February 3, the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was approved for use by the Singapore government (Lai, 2021a). The first shipment arrived in Singapore on February 17 (gov.sg, 2021c).

On February 22, the vaccination of all seniors aged 70 and above began. Previously, MOH had announced that seniors aged 60 to 69 years would commence their vaccination regime at the end of March. This was brought forward to the middle of March (MOH, 2021b).

On March 11, Singapore's national vaccination programme was extended to all seniors as well as high-risk groups and essential workers including postmen and migrant workers. This was due to the arrival of more supplies of vaccines (T. Goh, 2021a).

From March 17, the Moderna vaccine was made available for national rollout at four vaccination centres, mainly; Hong Kah North Community Club (CC), Marsiling CC, Punggol 21 CC and Radin Mas CC. Three other vaccination centres at Nanyang CC, Sengkang CC, and Arena@Our Tampines Hub were due to be opened. Other vaccination centres continued to use the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (D. Choo, 2021a). Singapore now had two vaccines being offered to the general public.

By March 23, 1,109,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses had been administered, with 799,00 having received one dose while 310,00 had completed both doses. Among seniors, 55 per cent had received their vaccination or made appointments to do so (gov.sg, 2021d).

On March 24, the MTF declared that the vaccination programme would be expanded to those aged 45 to 59 on 3 May and that they could register their interest for vaccination (M. Z. Lim, 2021a). On March 25, it was reported that more than 80 per cent of staff in education institutions had made appointments to get their first vaccine dose after being invited to do so (J. Lim, 2021b).

Throughout March, vaccine hesitancy was a topic of discussion amongst policymakers, business owners, human resources directors and managers. The challenge was among business leaders who had to encourage employees to trust the efficacy rates of the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines. Furthermore, companies debated how they could restructure work arrangements so that employees could get their doses. This included allowing workers to gain additional information about vaccination so that they could be confident about being inoculated against COVID-19 (J. Ang, 2021).

On April 3, Senior Minister of State for Health Mr Janil Puthuchery announced in parliament that 1.05 million individuals had received at least one dose of the vaccine. He also added that 468,000 people had received their second dose and completed their full vaccination regime. The vaccination exercise for those below 45 was expected to begin in June (Yuen, 2021d). On April 5, a parliamentary hearing revealed that about 1 per cent of the population could not receive their doses due to concerns regarding allergies and pre-existing medical conditions (Yuen, 2021e).

On April 13, broadcaster CNA interviewed several infectious disease experts who confirmed that it was possible but rare for fully vaccinated individuals to contract COVID-19. However, they assured the public that such cases of infection were low in Singapore due to minimal spread of COVID-19 in the community. They continued to stress adherence to safe distancing

measures to mitigate the spread of the virus (Abu Baker, 2021a).

On the same day, *The Straits Times* announced that people could choose what type of vaccine they wished to take by referring to the full list of vaccination centres and vaccines on the MOH website. The Moderna vaccine was being offered at 11 out of 28 centres while the rest were administering the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. The government also noted that slots at some centres were limited due to strong demand for vaccines and limited resources available (Lai, 2021b).

On May 18, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung announced that 12 to 15-year olds had been given the green light to get the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (T. Goh, 2021b). On June 1, students were able to book their vaccination appointment slots with priority being given to those sitting for their O, N, and A levels examinations. This would also include children with special needs. After this, students 12 years and above would have their turn to get vaccinated (J. Ong, 2021b).

On June 11, all Singaporeans aged 12 to 39 could get their vaccines. It was stipulated that children who turned 12 in 2021 must have crossed their birthday before they could get vaccinated. Those who had recovered from COVID-19 more than six months prior could also get their shot (Today, 2021).

On June 24, MOH concluded an advanced purchase agreement with American biotechnology company Novavax to procure the Novavax COVID-19 vaccine (Chong, 2021).

On July 23, it was reported that vaccinated individuals accounted for three-quarters of Singapore's COVID-19 infections during the month. Data showed that while COVID-19 vaccines did not prevent infection, it did help those infected avoid serious illness. Hence, continued caution was advised by the authorities (Aravindan & Lin, 2021).

On July 28, IHH Healthcare Singapore obtained approval to import the Sinopharm BIBP vaccine under the Pandemic Special Access Route (PSAR) that allowed individuals to use vaccines excluded from the national vaccination programme (D. Tham, 2021). This was important for people who could not take the mRNA vaccines such as Modern and Pfizer BioNTech (H. M. Chew, 2021b).

On August 6, MOH announced that individuals who received COVID-19 vaccines that were on the World Health's Organization's (WHO) emergency use list and Singapore's PSAR would be considered as fully vaccinated from August 10. This mainly involved people who had received doses of the Sinovac, Sinopharm, and AstraZeneca vaccines. They would also be eligible for vaccination-differentiated safe management measures such as dining-in at F&B establishments in bigger groups and travel concessions (Abu Baker, 2021b).

On August 9, 70 per cent of the population above 12 years old was vaccinated (D. Choo, 2021c). This percentage was to rise further. On August 29, Singapore succeeded in vaccinating 80 per cent of its population against COVID-19, making Singapore the most vaccinated country in the world at that time. Minister for Health Mr Ong Ye Kung announced this momentous milestone in a Facebook post and hinted at further easing of restrictions (Reuters, 2021a).

On September 3, the government announced that the COVID-19 vaccine booster shots would be offered to people who were moderately to severely immunocompromised. This included people who were aged 60 and above as well as residents of aged care facilities. This decision

was made after careful consideration by the Ministry of Health and the Expert Committee on COVID-19 Vaccination. It was noted that seniors who were at risk of severe COVID-19 infection might develop lower immune response after their first two doses. For many people, immunity levels would also drop over time. Hence, it was recommended that individuals receive a booster dose of mRNA vaccines such as Moderna and Pfizer BioNTech about six to nine months after the completion of their first vaccination regime (H. M. Chew, 2021d).

On September 14, seniors 60 years and above as well as residents of aged-care facilities who had received their two doses five months earlier were invited to receive their booster shots (MOH, 2021j). On October 9, the government also began administering booster shots to people aged 30 and above who had received their doses six months prior. This was to continue throughout the month (C. Tan, 2021c).

On October 23, the MTF announced that the Sinovac vaccine would be included in the national vaccination programme (MOH, 2021n).

The discovery of the Omicron variant from South Africa on November 24 accelerated the booster vaccination programme as the government strove to inoculate people against this new contagion (WHO, 2021).

On December 14, the vaccination booster programme was finally extended to 18 to 29-year-olds. It was also announced that doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine would be administered to children aged 5 to 11 years old before the end of 2021 (MOH, 2021p). By December 30, 87 per cent of the population had been fully vaccinated and 39 per cent had received their booster shots (T. Goh, 2021c).

Other Support Measures

Throughout 2021, the government introduced additional measures to aid Singaporeans who had lost their jobs or were unable to gain meaningful employment as a result of the pandemic.

On January 18, 2021, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) initiated the COVID-19 Recovery Grant (CRG) for lower-to-middle income employees and self-employed persons (SEPs) who had been financially affected (MSF, 2021b). Individuals who fit the grant's criteria could receive monetary help for fixed periods of time until they found work or were no longer in a financially vulnerable state. The CRG covered two categories of people:

1. The first provided up to \$700 monthly for three months to those who had been retrenched, had their contracts involuntarily terminated, or were placed on involuntary no-pay leave for at least three consecutive months.
2. The second category provided up to \$500 monthly for three months, for employees who faced a reduction in their salaries for at least three consecutive months with an average loss of at least half their salary. It also covered SEPs who faced net trade income (NTI) loss for at least three consecutive months with an overall average loss of at least 50 per cent of their NTI at the point of application. This loss had to be greater than their average month NTI in 2019 or 2020.

Applicants for both categories had to be above 21 years old; their prior household income should not exceed \$7,800, or a monthly per capita household income of not more than \$2,600. They also had to prove that they had consistently tried to secure work or had signed up for training programmes. Employees should have worked for at least six months cumulatively between January 2019 and December 2020. SEPs in question must have

declared their annual NTI in either 2019 or 2020. They could not have outstanding Medisave contributions at the point of application or make contributions through a GIRO (General Interbank Recurring Order) plan.

On March 22, it was reported that MSF had provided support for 10,000 individuals to the tune of \$10 million. Individuals who required help could apply online for the support until April 18 (MSF, 2021b).

On April 19, MSF introduced a second tranche of CRG. Individuals who were in their final month of assistance or had already come to the end of assistance were entitled to additional support for a further three to six months. The deadline for applications was December 31, 2021 (Menon, 2021b).

On December 21, MSF announced that the CRG would be extended by another 12 months until December 31, 2022. However, there were important caveats in this round of CRG. Employees who wished to apply for this round must have lost their jobs after January 23, 2020. For SEPs, the government would refer to their NTI losses after January 23, 2020 (gov.sg, 2021b).

Climate Change and the Green Plan 2030

Green Plan

Sustainability was central to the policy agenda in 2021 as Singapore prepared for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), which was held from October to November in Glasgow, Scotland. The aim of COP26 was to bring together various nations and parties to mobilise greater action towards achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Discussions took place amongst scores of negotiators, government representatives, businesses, and civil society groups (ukcop26.org, n.d.).

The government announced the Green Plan 2030 (greenplan.gov.sg, n.d.) on February 10 to help Singapore achieve its commitments under the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement. PM Lee stated that Singapore could leverage key technologies to contribute to climate adaptation and mitigation efforts (Ang & Mohan, 2021).

These aspirations were reflected in a speech by the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Ms Grace Fu on April 24, 2021 (MSE, 2021). The plan followed statements Senior Minister Mr Teo Chee Hean had made in 2020 regarding Singapore's efforts to halve its 2030 peak greenhouse gases emissions by 2050 with the ultimate aim of achieving net-zero emissions in the second half of the 21st century (PMO, 2020a).

The Green Plan was jointly launched by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of National Development (MND), the Ministry of Sustainability & Environment (MSE), the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), the Ministry of Transport (MOT), and the National Climate Change Secretariat (Ang & Mohan, 2021). It comprises five thrusts summarised here for ease of reference:

City in Nature

Singapore would develop of 130 hectares of new parks by 2026. Also, about 170 hectares of existing parks would be upgraded through the addition of more lush vegetation and greenery.

Between 2020 and 2030, Singapore would double the annual rate at which trees are planted to achieve the 1 million trees mark. In total, there would be 1,000 hectares of green spaces by 2035.

Sustainable Living

Singapore's waste to landfill per capita would be reduced by 2 per cent in 2026, and water consumption reduced to 130 litres per capita daily. Waste to landfill per capita would be cut by 30 per cent as well. In the realm of green infrastructure, the aim would be to achieve a target of 75 per cent mass public transport peak-period modal share, supported by plans to see the expansion of the rail network from around 230 to 360 kilometres by the early 2030s. Cycling paths would triple from 460 to 1,320 kilometres. Lastly, schools would reduce their net carbon emissions by two-thirds of the current state with at least 20 per cent of schools being carbon neutral by 2030.

Energy Reset

Singapore has key goals in the sphere of energy. By 2030, Singapore would have raised its solar energy deployment by five-fold, to at least 2 gigawatt-peak (GWp) to meet 3 per cent of its projected electricity demand and generate power for more than 350,000 households a year. There would be 200 megawatt (MW) energy storage systems deployed beyond 2025, which would power more than 16,000 households a day. Investments would be made in high-level generation technology that would meet emissions standards. The diversification of Singapore's electricity supply would also be paired with clean electricity imports.

Green infrastructure is the lynchpin of Singapore's sustainability strategy. By 2050, energy consumption through desalination processes would decrease from 3.5kWh/cubic metre to 2kWh/cubic metre where the long-term target is to hit 1kWh/cubic metre. This involves ensuring that the Tuas Nexus water treatment facility is 100 per cent energy self-sufficient. By gross floor area, 80 per cent of buildings were expected to be greened by 2030. The same percentage of new buildings is slated to become SLE (Super Low Energy) buildings from 2030 onwards. Best-in-class green buildings would see an 80 per cent improvement in energy efficiency from 2005 to 2030. HDB towns would reduce consumption by 15 per cent by 2030 (greenplan.gov.sg, n.d.).

In the realm of private transport, from 2025 onwards, new registrations for diesel cars and taxis would cease. Seven EV-ready towns with chargers at all HDB carparks would come into effect by 2025. From 2030, all new car and taxi registrations would have to be cleaner-energy models. The target would be to develop 60,000 charging points nationwide with 40,000 of them being in public carparks and 20,000 on private premises.

Green Economy

The government would invest in state-of-the-art energy and carbon efficiency technology to reduce its dependence on fossil fuel. By 2030, Jurong Island would have transformed into a sustainable energy and chemicals park. In this vein, Singapore would aim to be a hub for sustainable tourism and a leader in green finance and services. Singapore's status as a carbon services hub would bolster its ability to be a regional centre for sustainability solutions. This would create an environment where local enterprises could tap sustainability opportunities.

Resilient Future

By 2030, coastal protection plans would be completed for City-East Coast, North-West Coast; Lim Chu Kang and Sungei Kadut, and Jurong Island. Singapore would also be able to meet 30 per cent of its nutritional needs through locally produced food (greenplan.gov.sg, n.d.).

MAS and the Development of the Green Bonds Market

On May 19, 2021, a financial industry taskforce was set up by Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS). Its main aim was to introduce measures to accelerate green finance in Singapore. This mainly involved the setting up of a Green Bonds Market. Green finance is the integration of environmental, social and governance (ESG) requirements into financial services to support sustainable development. The government believed that Singapore's vibrant financial sector could lead the region by promoting sustainable financing, engaging financial institutions to think green, adopting industry standards and guidelines, encouraging industry-led building efforts, developing the green bond market, and collaborating with local and international stakeholders to distil the best practices (MAS, 2021).

Discussion about Conservation — Dover and Clementi Forests

In early 2021, discussions about nature conservation in Singapore reached a public audience. These revolved around the future of the Dover and Clementi forests. In 2003, Dover forest was designated as a residential zone that was subject to detailed planning by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). On December 20, 2020, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) published a 155-page report detailing an environmental study of the area. A day later, National Development Minister Mr Desmond Lee announced that Build-To-Order (BTO) flats would be launched in the Ulu Pandan estate, where 33 hectares of the forest were located. This triggered a campaign urging the government to preserve the forest (K. G. Ng, 2021).

On January 15, 2021, the Nature Society Singapore (NSS) published a 13-page proposal to HDB where they argued for the forest to be designated a "public-cum-nature park". This was due to its rich biodiversity as it was home to at least 158 animal species, including critically endangered ones, and 120 plant species. It also suggested that some parts of the forest could be set aside for a recreational park and community garden while the wildlife rich areas should be left untouched (J. Lim, 2021a). On January 28, Minister Lee stated that all feedback would be studied closely. This was followed by an extension of the public feedback period to February 1. The MP for Holland-Bukit Timah GRC, Mr Christopher de Souza, proposed alternative plots of land around the Ghim Moh neighbourhood for housing development.

On July 30, HDB announced that development plans for Dover Forest would be revised to balance the imperatives of nature conservation and meeting housing needs. A sizable portion of the forest's western half would be reserved for a nature park while the eastern half would be used for residential development. This plan integrated the findings from the environmental baseline study and 1,800 responses received through public feedback (K. G. Ng, 2021).

In similar fashion, calls for the preservation of Clementi Forest grew louder due to the unique nature of the reserve as compared with other reserves. Its lush greenery, towering trees and primal feel were the topics of discussion in January 2021. In response, Workers' Party (WP) MP Mr Dennis Tan asked during a parliamentary session if there would be a review of the status of Clementi Forest. In response, Minister Lee said that the forest would remain classified for residential use despite public calls for it to be preserved. He also stated that there were no immediate plans to develop the site for housing and that the site would be retained for future generations to decide if they wanted to use it for housing (Y. Low, 2021a).

COP26 — Fresh Commitments and Grace Fu's Role

Singapore government called for more active measures to meet emission targets at COP26. High on the agenda was the need to keep global temperatures within 1.5 degrees. Singapore stressed that this had to be done within the framework of the Paris Agreement. Additionally, Singapore's own 2030 Green Plan was referred to as proof of Singapore's commitment to achieving net zero by 2030 (Board, 2021). These were done with the understanding that Southeast Asia would bear the brunt of some of the worst effects of climate change in the coming decades. Singapore continued to emphasise cooperation through a multilateral framework that would enable nations around the world to contribute to climate action.

Speaking to the Singapore media at COP26, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Ms Grace Fu made the assurance that Singapore would do its part to comply with all the requirements of the climate change pledge as well as consider the potential of carbon markets. She reiterated Singapore's stance that the region would not be spared the worst effects of climate change. Hence, Singaporeans needed to be more aware of the impact of climate change and engage in greater collective action to achieve the country's green targets (Board, 2021).

The Green Plan in the Budget

In his Budget speech on February 16, 2021, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Mr Heng Swee Keat outlined Singapore's goals in addressing climate change. He reminded Singaporeans that sustainable development had always been a priority even in the city-state's founding years. He referred to programmes such as the 2019 Resource Sustainability Act and the Long-Term Low-Emissions Development Strategy, which aimed to help Singapore contribute to the fight against this monumental issue. He hoped the Green Plan would inspire a national movement where citizens played an active role in achieving a sustainable future (MOF, 2021a, p.30–31).

Budget 2021

The Budget was presented by Mr Heng who not only touched on Singapore's plans to deal with climate change but also the fiscal provision for the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr Heng noted that Singapore had suffered its worst recession since independence and acknowledged that it had been a difficult time for individuals and businesses.

However, in his opinion, the worst effects of this economic crisis were averted due to prudent fiscal policies that the government had adopted. Singapore's GDP contracted by 5.4 per cent in 2020. Its overall budget deficit stood at \$64.9 billion or 13.9 per cent of GDP. However, certain monetary policy measures had helped Singapore avoid a contraction larger than the one it experienced. They also helped save 155,000 jobs and stopped the resident unemployment rate from rising further (MOF, 2021a, p.2).

In the realm of COVID mitigation, lower-income families received support through initiatives such as the Workfare Special Payment and Grocery Vouchers. A new \$11 billion-dollar COVID-19 Resilience Package was introduced with \$4.8 billion directed towards protecting public health and safety as Singapore transitioned out of the strict COVID-19 management regime. This was to be implemented in conjunction with the national drive to vaccinate the wider population along with the other contact tracing, testing and safe distancing measures now that the vaccines were available (MOF, 2021a, p.2).

Supporting Families

In the same speech, Minister Heng unveiled a \$900 million-dollar Household Support Package. This comprised a one-off GST voucher, which took the form of a cash special payment of \$200 on top of the regular GST voucher that would be made available to lower- and middle-income households. In addition to this, a U-Save Special Payment GST Voucher to eligible households was also offered and provided an additional 50 per cent rebate over one year. This meant that each household would receive additional utility rebates of between \$120 and \$200 in 2021.

The second initiative involved an extension of the Service and Conservancy Charges (S&CC) Rebate for all eligible households in 2021.

The third was targeted at families with children below the age of 21. An additional \$200 top-up of the Child Development Account, Edusave Account, or Post-Secondary Education Account, would help parents invest in their children's future. This was in addition to the annual Edusave top-up for primary and secondary school children.

The fourth involved the distribution of \$100 worth of Community Development Council (CDC) vouchers per household for use at participating heartland shops and hawker centres. An additional grant worth \$150 million was also given to the CDCs (MOF, 2021a, p. 23).

Supporting Workers

Mr Heng stated that \$700 million would be used to continue the Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) that had been introduced in 2020. This would go towards supporting workers and businesses, and ease sectors that had been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The JSS were payments targeted at subsidising part of the wages of the employees in the worst hit sectors.

Schemes like SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, which included the Jobs Growth Incentive, traineeships, attachments, and internships would also be extended, with an additional \$5.4 billion allocated. This would support the hiring of 200,000 locals and provided up to 35,000 traineeship and training opportunities. The Jobs Growth Incentive provided 25 per cent to 50 per cent wage support for businesses hiring locals. It also encouraged businesses to hire mature workers, people with disabilities, and ex-offenders. A sum of \$200 million was set aside for the Senior Worker Early Adopter Grant and the Part-Time Re-employment Grant. Salaries of nurses and other healthcare workers would also be enhanced.

Mr Heng noted that many of these initiatives like the COVID-19 Recovery Grant had been used by companies and Singaporeans in the previous year. He hoped that more would do the same in 2021.

In this vein, \$870 million was directed at the aviation industry, \$133 million was set aside for taxi and private hire car drivers through the COVID-19 Driver Relief Fund, and \$45 million used to extend the Arts and Culture Resilience Package and Sports Resilience Package. Mr Heng reiterated that the monetary measures the government was adopting was geared towards helping Singaporeans preserve their jobs, find new ones, and adapt to these uncertain times (MOF, 2021a, p. 5–7).

Committee of Supply Debates

On March 8 2021, the Committee of Supply Debates ended after a discussion of a wide range of issues. Sixty-five speakers over the course of nine days debated the budget and its

contents. Parliament touched on topics such as the future-ready economy and workforce, fostering a caring and inclusive society, building a liveable and sustainable home, and fiscal sustainability. These formed the base of the Budget. The debates ended with parliament approving the government's \$107 billion spending plans (PMO, 2021a).

ECONOMIC POLICY

Digitalisation, Labour Laws, & Free Trade Agreements

Emerging Stronger Taskforce's Recommendations

In May 2020, the Emerging Stronger Taskforce (EST) was established under the Future Economy Council (FEC). The EST was tasked with identifying ways that Singapore could leverage certain competencies to thrive in a new and transformed world. From the get-go the EST initiated the Singapore Together Alliances for Action (AfAs) that allowed players from the public and private sectors to collaborate and act on the deliberations and recommendations. They were then collated and used by the FEC to conceive a vision for Singapore's future. These were published in a report on May 17, 2021. Chair of the FEC Mr Heng Swee Keat later called the report "visionary". The FEC later reported that it had accepted the recommendations made in the report and would incorporate them in its Industry Transformation Maps 2025 (MTI, 2021a).

The EST identified six key shifts, namely, the changing "global economic order"; accelerating industry consolidation and churn; the reconfiguration of global supply chains; accelerating digital transformation and innovation; changes in consumer preferences; and an increased focus on sustainability.

It highlighted nine areas in which these shifts would occur. They were AgriTech, Built Environment, EduTech, MedTech, Robotics, Smart Commerce, Supply Chains, Sustainability, and Travel and Tourism. The taskforce proposed five recommendations that would allow Singapore to be a "virtually unlimited and sustainable nation" (MTI, 2021a, p.1). This meant that a digital economy would be created out of Singapore with a reach far beyond physical boundaries.

The details are summarised here for ease of reference:

Virtually Unlimited

The EST recommended that Singapore should create new virtual frontiers by taking its Smart Nation ambitions global and becoming a crucial node in the emerging digitised world. This would mean increasing Singapore's connectivity to the world to access unlimited opportunities for enterprises, talent, and cities. It would mean helping local businesses create new products and services under the trusted Singapore brand and in that way, re-defining the country's relevance as a safe and smart city for trade, business, work and leisure.

Sustainability Nation — Seizing Growth Opportunities from Sustainability

Singapore would also develop itself as a sustainability hub to serve global demand especially in carbon trading and services. The development of a carbon marketplace would allow companies to offset their carbon footprint as well as exploit opportunities through research and innovation. It could strengthen its food resilience through AgriTech and leverage digitalisation to solidify the traceability and accountability of industry chains. AgriTech initiatives like indoor vertical farming could also be made economically viable and present

Singapore as a world leader even in this domain.

Sustainability Nation — Enabling Global Champions and Growing an Agile and Strong Singapore Core

The EST also recommended growing a pool of innovative and international Large Local Enterprises (LLEs) and a base of companies through the collective efforts of tripartite partners. It would mean that Singapore would have to remain open to international markets and foreign skills. This would have to occur even as Singapore looked to upgrading and upskilling its workers in an inclusive and digital manner. The aim would be to achieve a good balance between the need for foreign skills and expertise and nurturing a strong Singaporean core that is capable of adapting to shifts in the global economy.

Stronger Together — Institutionalising the AfA Model

The AfA approach utilises the complementary strengths of the private and public sectors. Hence, the EST suggested that this approach should be institutionalised. It was also suggested that future alliances be primarily established under the FEC to serve as an additional platform for public-private collaboration. This would be a key enabler for transformative economic growth.

Stronger Together — Strengthening International Partnerships

Finally, the EST recommended that platforms should be created to enable Singapore's partner countries in Southeast Asia at the business-to-business (B2B) level to deepen its engagement and knowledge of the region. Digital connectivity could be further entrenched across the region through the government's engagement with ASEAN that has plans to establish stronger digital integration in areas such as data flows and cybersecurity (MTI, 2021a, pp.2–3,).

Foreign Labour Policies

In July and September 2021, parliament debated Singapore's foreign labour policy. The discussions were ignited by a Facebook post by Progress Singapore Party (PSP) Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Mr Leong Mun Wai on June 22. Much of Mr Leong's criticisms were levelled against the Singapore-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Partnership (CECA), which was signed in 2005 (MTI, n.d.a). Mr Leong claimed that CECA was responsible for foreign PMETs (professionals, managers, executives, and technicians) displacing Singaporeans (Leong, 2021).

This triggered a flurry of responses from the government. The first round of parliamentary debates took place on July 6, 2021. Minister for Health Mr Ong Ye Kung and Minister for Manpower (MOM) Dr Tan See Leng took turns to disprove Mr Leong's assertions regarding FTAs and CECA. Mr Ong delivered a ministerial statement to clarify the government's stance. Drawing on his experience as a free trade negotiator, he clarified that CECA did not allow the unconditional entry of Indian professionals. Rather, the government had maintained the full right to accept or deny entry to anyone coming into the country. He also stressed that globalisation was key to Singapore's survival and that FTAs were vital to the Singapore economy as they provided jobs and opportunities for Singaporeans especially local PMEs. He stressed that the competition between locals and foreigners was not a zero-sum game (Y. K. Ong, 2021). He added that Indian nationals were not treated more favourably than Singaporeans, and that they were vital contributors to the Singapore economy. Mr Ong

argued that FTAs and specifically, CECA had been criticised to discredit the government's policies (Baharudin, 2021b).

Dr Tan See Leng also provided data that showed that in 2020, there were 177,000 Employment Pass Holders in Singapore. Among them were about 4,200 intra-corporate transferees (ICTs), of which 500 were from India. This meant that the number of ICTs coming into Singapore was very small relative to the total number of EP holders, and even fewer could be attributed to CECA; more jobs had actually been created for Singaporeans than foreigners.

While the proportion of Employment Pass (EP) holders from India had increased by 14 per cent since 2005, this was not due to CECA but a demand for global tech talent where the greatest sources were India and China. Hence, the influx of Indian nationals was not because of CECA but the demands of a global market of which Singapore was a key player, argued Dr Tan. MOM was still cognisant of the fact that the concentration of workers could cause social friction and anxiety. Dr Tan stressed that MOM was sensitive to the sentiments of Singaporeans and was practising due diligence in ensuring fairness in employment practices across the board (MOM, 2021b).

On August 31, the PSP NCMPs filed a private members' motion in parliament with the objective of compelling the government to take urgent and concrete action to address what they thought was widespread anxiety among Singaporeans on jobs and livelihood caused by the Foreign Talent Policy and the "movement of natural persons" provisions in some free trade agreements like CECA. This set the stage for the second parliamentary debate on the issue on September 14 (J. Ong, 2021c).

In response, Minister for Finance Mr Lawrence Wong tabled an alternative motion. He acknowledged that Singaporeans had real fears about their livelihoods but regretted attempts to spread misinformation about FTAs and CECA that served to incite bigotry against Indian nationals. He deplored the PSP's attempts to distort the truth and urged it to refrain from its anti-foreigner rhetoric (MOF, 2021b).

These sentiments were echoed by Law and Home Affairs Minister Mr K. Shanmugam. In response, NCMPs Mr Leong and Ms Hazel Poa, a fellow NCMP from PSP, argued that the government had "opened the floodgates" and had underappreciated the severity of the problem at hand. Mr Leong said that the recently announced plans to introduce anti-workplace discrimination laws would not be effective, and argued that a rebalancing was required in the long run. He also insisted his party's stance on the issue had nothing to do with racism or xenophobia (Y. T. Choo, 2021).

International Trade Agreements

On February 11, 2021, the UK-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (UKSFTA) came into effect. The UKSFTA is also the UK's first FTA with an ASEAN country. Through this, companies would be able to enjoy 84 per cent tariff elimination for all Singapore products entering the UK.

In November 2021, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement which had been signed by 15 countries on November 15, 2020, reached the quorum needed to take effect. Singapore joined Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand in this effort. It would have come into force for 10 of these countries

including Singapore on January 1, 2022, with the rest to follow later. The RCEP would be the world's largest FTA, accounting for 30 per cent of global GDP and about a third of the world's population (MTI, n.d.b).

National Day Rally Speech

On August 29, 2021, PM Lee delivered his National Day Rally speech. He noted that it was his first in two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He thanked Singaporeans for persevering through the twists and turns of the pandemic and for their trust and cooperation, highlighting the frontline workers who bore the full brunt of the fight against the virus. With the vast majority of the population vaccinated, he said Singapore was well positioned to treat COVID as an endemic disease. PM Lee moved to discuss the policy reforms that the government would introduce in the days to come.

Fair Employment Practices

PM Lee recognised that low-wage workers and middle-income Singaporeans were feeling the pressure of competition with foreigners. He pointed out that much of the tension surrounded work pass holders and their role in Singapore society. Echoing the parliamentary debates in July and September, PM Lee reiterated the value of Singapore's openness to foreign labour.

PM Lee said he understood the lived experiences of Singaporeans who struggled with the fear of losing their jobs to foreigners. He said that the government was playing an active role in ensuring the quality of EP or S Pass workers and that it was likely to tighten the criteria and therefore access to such passes. Work pass holders should be admitted into sectors of the economy that needed them and not do jobs that Singaporeans were qualified to do and able to meet businesses requirements.

However, in cases where companies did not fulfil their obligation to hire Singaporeans, where possible, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair & Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) would ensure that they adhered to key guidelines. NTUC had previously called for a strengthening of TAFEP. At the rally, PM Lee announced that the government would enshrine TAFEP guidelines into law to expand the range of actions that the government could take against companies that violated anti-discrimination rules (PMO, 2021c).

Gig Economy Workers

PM Lee spoke about his particular concern for low-wage gig economy workers. These included delivery workers and riders who worked for online platforms such as Foodpanda, Grab, and Deliveroo. They did not have an employer-employee contract with the platforms and were therefore not afforded basic protection that other employees enjoyed, like workplace injury compensation, union representation, and employer CPF contributions. As such, the PM announced that a committee would be set up to look into these matters (PMO, 2021c). Minister for Manpower Dr Tan See Leng later announced on Facebook that such a committee had indeed been set up (Y-C. Tham, 2021).

Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill

PM Lee took some time to set the context of the government's decision to introduce the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act. Under the bill, new laws would be enacted that combine all current legal powers dispersed across the Penal Code and Sedition Act ensure that race

relations were harmonious in Singapore. The new laws would empower the government to order someone to stop committing an offence regarding racism and compel them to learn more about the other race. The purpose — to heal community rifts and repair ties. It was hoped that this option of a “softer” approach would prevent the development of resentment by allowing a process of healing. Non-compliance would result in criminal prosecution.

The new act would stress the importance of racial harmony in Singapore and complement the existing Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act that was passed in 1990 to ensure that religion was not politicised or subverted for various means. PM Lee noted that the government had never needed to invoke the law but that its existence was a crucial safeguard. Ultimately, solutions to racism required a change in societal attitudes.

This was of great importance as throughout the course of 2021, he noted there had been several incidents that had caused race relations to “come under stress”. PM Lee mentioned examples such as netizens posting nasty comments about a series of National Day banners in Tanjong Pagar featuring Singaporean families of different races. The bulk of these comments were directed towards a Singaporean Indian family featured on the banner. These netizens accused the government of being pro-foreigner and pro-Indian. It was revealed that the family that was featured comprised born-and-bred Singaporeans, with one member being a national athlete too (Q. Ang, 2021a).

In another case, a polytechnic lecturer berated an interracial couple for dating one another when he met them in a public space. The woman was half-Chinese and half-Thai and her partner was half-Indian and half-Filipino. Both of them were Singaporeans. The online post of the recording of the incident went viral because of the objectionable reaction of the lecturer. He was dismissed from his position in the polytechnic but later, offered an apology for what he admitted were “bigoted” comments (Oh, 2021b).

Lastly, PM Lee noted that with the emergence of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in India, negative sentiment had arisen against Indian nationals living and working in Singapore. Stating that it was illogical to blame variants of COVID on different nationalities, he said there was no cause to justify such discriminatory sentiments. PM Lee reminded Singaporeans that it took decades to build up racial and religious harmony and urged all to work towards making Singapore a more tolerant and equal society. He said policies had to be kept up to date because racial and religious harmony was not only delicate but also dynamic.

Introduction of Tudung for Muslim Nurses

PM Lee announced that from November 2021, Muslim nurses in the public healthcare sector here would be allowed to wear *tudungs* with their uniforms if they wished to. He emphasised that it was imperative for religious sentiments to be balanced and tolerant even as the world went through tectonic shifts of rising religiosity. PM Lee noted that the issue of Muslim women donning the *tudung* issue was significant as it was part of their faith and identity but increasing so because of the rise in religious fervour among Muslims in Southeast Asia and Singapore.

PM Lee stressed that the government understood their desire to wear the *tudung* but was also aware of how they may be perceived by non-Muslims. He noted that whilst the *tudung* could be worn in most places without restrictions, the status quo had to be maintained for those in service in the Singapore Armed Forces, the Home Team police and civil defence forces, and other uniformed services so that they could serve the public without fear or favour.

Gender Relations

On January 30, 2021, the Minister of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) Mr Masagos Zulkifli announced that the year would be dedicated to the celebration of the contributions of women in Singapore. The nation's progress and achievements were inextricably linked to the efforts of mothers, sisters, daughters and women more generally. MSF would drive a review of issues affecting women to bring a mindset change regarding gender equality, and put up a White Paper to parliament with recommendations for the continued progress of women and the creation of an even fairer and inclusive society here.

MSF organised a series of discussions called "Conversations on Singapore Women's Development" that were initiated in 2020 (Begum, 2021). On September 17, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) reported that since October 2020, 300 participants from more than 60 organisations across various sectors and industries had been consulted (SCWO, 2021).

Minister for Home Affairs and Law Mr K. Shanmugam also announced a comprehensive review of women's issues as a result of acts of sexual violence, voyeurism, and differential treatment that had occurred on university campuses. He stated that discrimination based on gender was a "deep violation of fundamental values" that should not be allowed to stand (Begum, 2021).

Other Views: Workers' Party Position Paper, AWARE Position Paper

On August 3, 2021, a motion on gender equality was passed in parliament. The motion was jointly raised by Workers' Party (WP) MPs Ms He Ting Ru and Mr Leon Perera. It affirmed the need for gender equality to be a societal effort aimed at removing all barriers to women in achieving their full potential in Singapore. An amendment was added by People's Action Party (PAP) MP Mr Vikram Nair to include the statement that parliament was looking for concrete steps in the upcoming government White Paper that arose from the "Conversations on Singapore Women's Development" organised by the SCWO (Kurohi, 2021b).

Following, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) launched its own set of initiatives through a two-pronged approach. The first prong was the creation of a series of wish lists (AWARE, 2021a) in early July. The lists were drawn up based on the output of a series of discussions on a host of issues including but not limited to discrimination against single parents, migrant spouses and transnational couples, workplace harassment and bullying, sexual harassment at Institutes of Higher Learning. The second was the publication of a comprehensive 242-page omnibus report that was released on July 29 (AWARE, 2021b) to highlight the obstacles that marginalised women faced — discrimination and other barriers to their progress, abuse and violence.

Family Relations

On August 4, 2021, MSF launched the Alliance for Action to Strengthen Marriages and Family Relationships. This was prompted by data, which showed that recent marriages were ending earlier in part due to the toll of COVID-19 pandemic on lives and livelihoods. The alliance would link community, religious groups, and Singaporeans, to bolster marriages and family ties (MSF, 2021c). This would include providing support for couples who tied the knot before they turned 21 as well as marriages and families comprising people of different religious faiths (Tan & Menon, 2021).

Domestic Violence

In light of debates surrounding gender and family relations, the issue of domestic violence came to the fore. MSF launched a 24-hour hotline for victims of domestic abuse on January 18, 2021. This is Singapore's first national initiative dedicated to calls related to abuse and violence. It joined 10 other helplines for child abuse and family violence (Menon, 2021a).

Debate on Toxic Masculinity

On June 3, 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held a Women's Conference that explored solutions to "toxic masculinity" through legislation and cultural mindset shifts. Toxic masculinity was defined as the negative effects of social pressures on men to behave in certain ways that could take the form of harmful attitudes, speech and violence.

The context for this was that earlier in May 2021, IPS S R Nathan Fellow and Executive Director of AWARE, Ms Corinna Lim, had stoked debate by arguing that the education system and National Service had bred toxic masculinity among Singapore men at an IPS-Nathan Lecture. She had explained how these bred exaggerated forms of "manly" traits such as strength, aggression and independence that led to an unhealthy notion of what it meant to be a man today, leading them to think they needed to assert themselves in these ways to prove their masculinity. Subsequently at the Women's Conference, academics, activists and lawyers joined her in seeking a re-evaluation of societal norms and concepts that could breed toxic masculinity and unhealthy gender relations in Singapore (Kurohi, 2021a).

Restructuring of Singapore Press Holdings

On May 6, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) announced that it would transfer its media business to a not-for-profit venture and create a new company limited by guarantee (CLG).

On August 2, 2021, it was announced that Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) would be delisted and the non-media business taken over by Keppel Pegasus, a wholly-owned subsidiary of industrial conglomerate Keppel in a \$3.4 billion deal (Poon, 2021).

Two days later, it was announced that former SPH deputy chief executive Mr Patrick Daniel would be the interim CEO of the new CLG (Sim, 2021).

On August 17, an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) was held for shareholders to vote on the proposal. Independent financial advisor Evercore Asia Singapore stated in a letter to the board of directors that shareholders were in favour of the proposal (The Straits Times, 2021b).

On August 27, SPH Chief Executive Mr Ng Yat Chung told shareholders that all other options such as privatisation or selling the media unit had been considered before the restructuring act (C. Tan, 2021b).

On September 10, 97.5 per cent of the shareholders supported SPH's plan to splinter off its media business. This was followed by a vote on Keppel's desire to privatise SPH's non-media business (The Straits Times, 2021b).

From October to November 2021, discussions were held over the distribution of SPH's REIT units. This required the approval of both SPH and Keppel shareholders. On December 1, the restructuring process was completed with SPH's entire media-related business and 2,500

employees transferred to the new CLG SPH Media Trust (SMT) for a nominal consideration of \$1. This also meant that SPH would no longer have to adhere to the Newspaper and Printing Press Act in Singapore (Choy, 2021).

The media restructuring process stirred debate in parliament regarding issues of editorial independence of the country's English broadsheet. In May, Leader of the Opposition, WP MP Mr Pritam Singh asked if the new CLG would be protected from government intervention. He suggested that this had to be the case to prevent media bias towards the ruling party. In response, then Minister for Communications and Information Mr S. Iswaran insisted that editorial independence already existed within Singapore's media scene and that Singaporeans had high levels of trust in local media outlets, compared to the trust people in other countries had for their mainstream media. He added that progress had been made but there was room for improvement (Lin & Abdullah, 2021).

FICA Debate

On September 13, 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) introduced the new Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill (FICA) in parliament. The bill was aimed at curbing covert efforts of foreign entities to manipulate and undermine Singapore's political and social fabric (MHA, 2021a). It would aim to restrict access to online content suspected to be of this nature, and also register individuals and entities in Singapore that have foreign ties. Such "politically significant persons" would have to disclose the foreign funding they received. There was also to be a ban on foreign volunteers of political parties (J. S. Ng, 2021). MHA stated that the bill was to deal with issues like cybersecurity and hybrid warfare where states could exploit the internet to usurp Singapore's sovereignty. It was meant to target local proxies in Singapore that were working on the orders of foreign governments (MHA, 2021b).

Worries in the Education Sector

FICA generated much debate with its critics citing its broad-ranging nature. This was evident when it came to how the bill would affect the education sector in Singapore. The critics noted that according to its stipulations, any researcher, academic, or student could run the risk of being labelled a "politically significant person" due to their involvement in a highly globalised higher education system and academia; the fostering of international ties with the exchange of ideas, academics and students were an integral part of the university system. Also, universities fostered intellectual freedom to examine all sorts of issues relating to politics and society, so the question was whether FICA would have a deleterious effect on such freedom (Academia.sg, 2021).

On October 4 2021, Mr Shanmugam delivered a parliamentary speech in which he sought to clear misconceptions regarding the perceived clampdown on academic freedom. He clarified that normal academic activities would not fall under FICA. Hence, activities such as "presenting research at overseas conferences, writing for international journals, multi-author book projects, publishing in and reviewing for prestigious academic presses, participating in international, collaborative research projects, partaking of fellowships, visiting appointments, training programmes, and participation in international funding opportunities" would not be penalised.

Mr Shanmugam expressed that FICA would only come into effect if an academic crossed the line and became a foreign agent. He cited the example of China-born American academic Huang Jing who was expelled from Singapore in 2017 for trying to influence the city-state's foreign policy and public opinion for a foreign government (Sim, 2017).

Worries in Civil Society

Apart from academia, many in civil society were concerned about government overreach. Journalists, lawyers, human rights activists and opposition party members argued that FICA gave the government arbitrary power to prosecute anyone it deemed to be a foreign agent based on flimsy allegations. They argued that the government could suppress opinions it did not like and that this was a blow to the democratic process (BBC, 2021). Furthermore, the law was so broad that cooperation with foreign individuals could also be construed as activity on behalf of a foreign entity. They stressed that FICA would ultimately blur the line between genuine foreign interference and alternate opinions based on one's personal convictions (Han, 2021).

Quick Passage of Legislation

On September 29, the WP suggested that certain amendments be made to the bill. While it understood the need for Singapore to defend herself against malicious foreign actors, it disagreed with the original bill that had been tabled in parliament. Hence, the WP suggested that there should be provision for the oversight of the actions of the Executive by the Judiciary, a more detailed scoping of executive powers to prevent the likelihood of abuse of power, and greater clarity and transparency on the entities and identities that FICA is used on (WP, 2021b). On October 4, Leader of the Opposition (LO), Mr Pritam Singh criticised the government for not consulting the public before introducing the bill in parliament (Yong, 2021). A petition to seek more consultation on and scrutiny of the bill by PSP NCMP Leong Mun Wai failed to delay the bill (J. Ong, 2021d).

In response, Minister for Law and Home Affairs Mr K. Shanmugam clarified that the bill had benefitted from three years' worth of debates and consultation with experts (J. Ong, 2021e). MHA insisted that the bill did not apply to Singaporeans debating issues or advocating viewpoints. It also did not cover collaboration between Singaporeans and foreigners. However, it would only kick in if a Singaporean was working for a foreign power and doing so in ways that were contrary to public interest (Cheng, 2021). On October 5, parliament passed FICA with a majority of 75 to 11 votes (V. Lim et al., 2021).

Future of Yale-NUS College

On August 27, 2021, it was announced that Yale-NUS College and the University Scholars Programme (USP) in the National University of Singapore (NUS) would be merged to form a new college in 2022. NUS stated that the new school would have a curriculum that incorporated the best aspects of USP and Yale-NUS College. The graduating students of the new college would receive degrees conferred by their home schools or faculty. NUS stressed that the aim was to provide students with a holistic and interdisciplinary liberal arts education. The programme would retain the majors, second majors, minors, and specialisations of USP. The new college was expected to welcome its first batch of 500 students in 2022. Existing USP students would make the transition to the new college that year while Yale-NUS students who matriculated in 2021 would be part of the last batch of graduating students in 2025 (H. M. Ang, 2021b).

This decision came as a shock to students from Yale-NUS and USP as they had not been consulted on the issue (Ang & Yeoh, 2021). These sentiments extended to parents, lecturers and staff members who criticised the unilateral decision NUS had taken (Q. Ang, 2021b). In response to these reservations, Education Minister Mr Chan Chun Sing stated that the merger had been influenced by the desire to provide a truly interdisciplinary education. He

argued that whilst the cost of attending Yale-NUS (which was double that of funding a student in NUS' humanities or a science student) was a factor in the decision, it was not the key motivation for it. Instead, it was to give students an even better programme that it would be "inclusive, affordable and flexible".

Furthermore, he refuted charges that the merger would stifle academic freedom. Mr Chan considered it unfair to faculty members of NUS and other autonomous universities to suggest that they were teaching or conducting research under conditions that were "less free" than for Yale-NUS faculty, and that the College was a "paragon of academic freedom". He declared that this was a wonderful opportunity for university education in Singapore and that it would pave the way for collaboration with other universities (W. K. Ng, 2021).

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Leadership Succession

Heng Swee Keat Declines Leadership Role

On April 8, 2021, Mr Heng announced that he would be stepping aside from being the leader of the fourth-generation (4G) PAP team. His reasons include his age, the arduous challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, health-related issues, and the short "runway" he would have if he were to succeed PM Lee just after the crisis of the pandemic (S. Tan, 2021). He penned a letter to PM Lee explaining his decision and advocating the selection of a younger leader with a greater political span. His letter was accepted by PM Lee who praised Mr Heng for his dedication and commitment to the welfare of Singapore (The Straits Times, 2021a).

The decision to step down came as a surprise to many people including the Leader of the Opposition Mr Pritam Singh. Mr Singh reiterated that the Opposition in parliament as well as his WP colleagues were looking forward to working with whoever was selected to be the next premier by the 4G PAP leadership.

Political analysts noted that Mr Heng's decision to step down illustrated the robustness of Singapore's political system and institutions as it was not going to shake the trust Singaporeans had in the government. Ultimately, political stability was secured with the PAP proving itself to be a flexible party with an eye for political talent and continuity (Tham & Koh, 2021).

Cabinet Reshuffle

On April 23, PM Lee announced a major cabinet reshuffle with seven ministers switching portfolios. PM Lee stated that Mr Heng's decision to step down left a vacancy in the post of finance minister. Filling it created a domino effect across other ministries.

The moves among the younger yet more heavy-weight 4G leaders were as follows: Education Minister Mr Lawrence Wong and Second Minister for Finance since 2016 replaced Mr Heng as Finance Minister. Minister for Trade and Industry Mr Chan Chun Sing was appointed as Minister for Education. Mr Gan Kim Yong, a 3G leader, moved into the Trade and Industry Ministry, making way for Transport Minister Mr Ong Ye Kung to take over as Minister for Health. As such, he would co-chair the MTF with Mr Wong. These new appointments took effect on May 15 (H. M. Chew, 2021a).

Progress Singapore Party

On March 28, 2021, six new members and more women were voted into the Progress Singapore Party's 12-member Central Executive Committee (CEC). Four of them were candidates who contested the 2020 General Election (GE). They were psychiatrist Dr Ang Yong Guan, chartered accountant Ms Kayla Low, lawyer Ms Wendy Low, and technologist Mr Harish Pillay.

Dr Ang and Ms Kayla Low had contested the Marymount and Yio Chu Kang SMCs, respectively, while Ms Wendy Low and Mr Pillay had contested Tanjong Pagar GRC. Ms Wendy Low was also head of the PSP's Women's Wing. The other new CEC members included Ms Jess Chua and Mr Phuang Yew Huat. PSP founder Dr Tan Cheng Bock, members Mr Wang See Chuang, Mr Francis Yuen, Ms Peggie Chua as well as NCMPs Ms Hazel Poa and Mr Leong Mun Wai remained on the CEC (Yuen, 2021b).

On April 1, Dr Tan Cheng Bock moved from being of Secretary-General to Chairman of the party. He was replaced by former Republic of Singapore Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Mr Francis Yuen who had been Assistant Secretary-General and had contested Chua Chu Kang GRC in the 2020 GE. Dr Tan said he was not stepping aside but "changing gears", that he would be mentor to Mr Yuen whose role will be to bolster the PSP's core team and carry out grassroots work (Yuen, 2021c).

On April 27, the head of the PSP's Youth Wing Mr Terence Soon quit the party citing job opportunities and family commitments. He was replaced by Ms Jess Chua, a pricing manager at Air France-KLM on April 29 (J. Ong, 2021a).

On August 11, PSP member and former election candidate Bradley Bowyer, noted for his views on foreign manpower policy, resigned from the party. He was also opposed to the government's vaccine-differentiated measures. As a result, he insisted that he would not change his views and resigned from the PSP to limit the liability to it (H. M. Chew, 2021c).

On October 25, party treasurer Ms Kayla Low stepped down from the CEC citing work and travel commitments (J. Ong, 2021f).

The Raeesah Khan Saga

In November and December 2021, the country was rocked by an admission by WP MP for Sengkang GRC, Ms Raeesah Khan, that she had lied twice in parliament when she claimed she had witnessed the police mishandle a victim reporting a case of rape. The timeline of events has been provided below for easy reference.

Timeline

On August 3, the WP tabled a motion pertaining to the empowerment of women. Ms Khan delivered a speech which she claimed that she had accompanied a rape victim to a police station where the victim was treated poorly (WP, 2021a). In response, Minister of State for Home Affairs Mr Desmond Tan pressed her for more details. He stressed that Ms Khan's allegations were serious and that they needed to be examined further (Lai, 2021c). Following this, WP Secretary-General and Leader of the Opposition Mr Pritam Singh advised Ms Khan to contact the people involved (Lin, 2021).

During the week of August 10, Ms Khan privately disclosed personal information regarding the case as well as her own sexual assault to party leaders, Mr Singh, WP Chairman Ms

Sylvia Lim, and MP for Aljunied Mr Faisal Manap. Mr Singh said he had counselled Ms Khan to disclose this information to her family and then set the record straight in parliament. She was told that she had the power to make any parliamentary clarification in her capacity as an elected MP.

In September, Ms Khan did not attend parliament due to a bout of shingles (Lin, 2021).

On October 4, Minister for Law and Home Affairs Mr K. Shanmugam asked Ms Khan to provide more details regarding the case in parliament. Ms Khan declined to do so citing confidentiality reasons. She also stated that she had been unsuccessful in contacting the victim (Mohan, 2021).

On October 20, the police declared that they had not been able to identify the case of sexual assault that was allegedly mishandled. They also said that Ms Khan had not responded to requests to provide more details. Ms Khan then said that she planned to speak about the matter in parliament on November 1 (Lin, 2021).

On November 1, Ms Khan admitted that she had lied in parliament about accompanying a rape victim to the police station and apologised for the allegations she had made. Leader of the House Ms Indranee Rajah stated that she had no choice but to raise a formal complaint against Ms Khan for breaching parliamentary privilege. Ms Indranee referred the matter to the Committee of Privileges (COP) to determine if a breach of parliamentary privileges had occurred (H. M. Ang, 2021c). The WP responded by stating that Ms Khan should not have shared an untrue account in parliament (Mahmud, 2021).

On November 2, the WP formed a disciplinary panel comprising of Mr Singh, Ms Sylvia Lim and Mr Faisal Manap to look into Ms Khan's statements. The panel would invite party members to share their views on the issue before submitting its report to its central committee for deliberation (CNA, 2021b).

On November 30, Ms Khan informed Mr Singh of her intentions to leave the party and vacate her position as MP. She tendered her resignation before the WP central committee. Later in the day, she sent her resignation letter to the Speaker of Parliament (Lin, 2021).

Press Conference

On December 2, the WP held a media conference during which it was revealed that the leadership was aware of the fact that Ms Khan had lied about the sexual assault case after her original speech in August. Mr Singh stated that Ms Khan had been given enough opportunity to come clean about this.

Mr Singh answered queries from the media regarding the leadership's decision to allow her error to go uncorrected, saying that every WP MP member was a leader in his or her own right. Hence, it was up to the individual to correct his or her error in their professional capacity as an MP. Mr Singh admitted that the risk of the problem being aggravated was high but that only Ms Khan truly knew about the details of the case. As such, the leaders had given her the benefit of the doubt and allowed her to clarify matters on her own (Lin, 2021).

Committee of Privileges

On December 1, the COP announced that it was continuing to look into the complaint against Ms Khan. They invoked the Parliament Act which regulates the conduct of MPs and other people associated with parliamentary proceedings. Using this, they could summon any

person to testify before the committee to give evidence. In this regard, the committee called for Mr Pritam Singh, Ms Sylvia Lim, and Mr Faisal Manap to present their evidence along with other WP members (CNA, 2021c).

Knock-on Effect

The investigations into Ms Khan's allegations generated reactions within civil society. Gender advocacy group AWARE was "shocked and disappointed" that Ms Khan had lied in parliament. The organisation understood her intentions to shed light on the way officials handled sexual violence cases. Drawing on Ms Khan's claim that she had meet the alleged victim in a support group for survivors of sexual assault, AWARE stated that her decision to share the anecdote without the person's permission was not survivor-centric. Hence, Ms Khan had betrayed the trust of the individual in question. Ultimately, AWARE was saddened by Ms Khan's lie and considered it to be a setback for advocacy regarding sexual violence (Chelvan, 2021).

The COP would deliberate on the testimonies of the witnesses and consider what penalties would be levelled on Ms Khan and her leaders. Its report and recommendations were eventually made public on February 10, 2022.

Infighting within the PSP

On November 18, 2021, the Progress Singapore Party was sued by its former member, Ms Kala Manickam. Ms Kala had been part of a PSP team that contested unsuccessfully in Nee Soon GRC in the 2020 GE. She wanted the PSP to declare that it was wrong in terminating her membership in December 2020. She claimed that the PSP cut off resources and support for her. In addition to this, she sought a \$10,000 refund, which equalled her contribution towards election expenses.

The PSP countered her lawsuit, arguing that she had been difficult to work with during and after the elections. It said there was no basis for Ms Kala to receive a refund of \$10,000 that had been the contribution of every election candidate on its ticket. It also charged that the PSP paid an additional \$23,627 as her expenses amounted to \$33,627. It claimed it had tried to heal the rift with Ms Kala but to no avail, which ultimately led to 66 out of 71 cadre members of the PSP voting to reject her appeal against her termination on March 28, 2021 (Koh, 2021).

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