



The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2023

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a review of key policy and political developments in Singapore in 2023.

On 25 May 2023, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) stated that the growth forecast for Singapore's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was between "0.5 to 2.5 per cent", with the final result likely to occur at the mid-point of the range (MTI, 2023). On 15 February 2024, MTI announced that the economy expanded by 1.1 per cent in 2023, slowing from the 3.8 per cent expansion in 2022 (MTI, 2024). This also fell short of Bloomberg's external analysts' forecast of growth of 2.5 per cent (Tan, 2024).

The Manufacturing sector contracted by 4.3 per cent, a reversal from the 2.7 per cent growth in 2022. Within this sector, all clusters except for Transport Engineering recorded output declines. Construction grew by 5.2 per cent, improving from the 4.6 per cent growth in 2022, supported by expansion in both public and private sector construction works. The Service sector expanded by 2.3 per cent, slowing from the 5.1 per cent growth in 2022 where expansion was mainly in the Information and Communications, and Transportation and Storage sectors, as well as the residual category called "other sectors" (MTI, 2024).

Singapore's overall inflation cooled slightly to 4.8 per cent in 2023, compared to 6.1 per cent in 2022 (MTI, 2023, 2024). Core inflation (excluding private transport and accommodation costs to better reflect the expenses of local households) in 2023 stood at 4.2 per cent, little different from 4.1 per cent in 2022 (Subhani, 2024).

According to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), total employment grew by 88,400 in 2023, largely driven by non-resident employment growth. The resident employment rate remained high while the resident unemployment rate was only 2.8 per cent, close to the 2.9 per cent reported for 2022 (MOM, 2024).

Singapore's total population stood at 5.92 million at June 2023, a 5 per cent increase from June 2022. The citizen and permanent resident (PR) populations increased by 1.9 per cent between June 2022 and June 2023 mainly due to the easing of travel restrictions. The non-resident population stood at 1.77 million, an increase of 13.1 per cent between June 2022 to 2023 as a result of foreign employment growth (National Population and Talent Division [NPTD], n.d.).

Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war after Hamas's attack and hostage-taking in Israel on 7 October 2023 contributed to global uncertainty. The war between Russia and Ukraine affected global energy and food markets, and disrupted supply chains. Meanwhile, Israel's campaign against Hamas with its collateral damage on civilian Palestinians living in Gaza meant that more attention was given to maintaining Singapore's social cohesion between its diverse racial and religious communities (Oh, 2023; Ong, 2022a).

POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Living in a Post-COVID World

On 13 February 2023, Singapore returned to the lowest green level of its Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON), a health alert system. On the same day, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Mr Lawrence Wong announced the standing down of the multi-ministry COVID task force that he co-chaired from 22 January 2020 (Y.H. Goh, 2023a).

At the time, the international community had considered the threat of the virus to be low, and Singapore was confident about ending its few remaining COVID-19 measures and “establishing an endemic COVID-19 new norm” (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2023a).

Specifically, masks were no longer required for travel on public transport, TraceTogether and SafeEntry contact-tracing programmes were terminated, and non-vaccinated travellers did not need negative pre-departure COVID-19 tests to enter the country (Khalik, 2023a; W. K. Ng, 2023).

From April 2023, those who required treatment for the viral illness and its complications would no longer receive full subsidy of vaccines or oral antivirals (Khalik, 2023a; W. K. Ng, 2023).

White Paper on Singapore’s response to COVID-19

On 8 March, the government published the *White Paper on Singapore’s Response to COVID-19. Lessons for the Next Pandemic*. Based on insights from an internal review by the former Head of Civil Service, Mr Peter Ho, and after-action reviews of various government agencies, it recorded a timeline of how the pandemic unfolded in Singapore and evaluated its response (Gov.sg, 2023; Khalik, 2023b).

On what the nation did well, the White Paper credited the government for the resilience of Singapore’s healthcare system; its comprehensive vaccination programme; the maintenance of supply chains throughout the pandemic; its support for people’s livelihoods where resident unemployment rate stayed below 5 per cent throughout 2020 and returned to pre-COVID levels by the end of the year; its support of vulnerable segments of the population; how the national education system kept going amidst the disruptions; and the communication between government and people that fostered trust and rallied the nation together against COVID-19 (Gov.sg, 2023).

On areas where improvements were needed, the report flagged the outbreaks in migrant worker dormitories; the delayed closing of borders at the onset of the pandemic which allowed infections to slip through; the need to have been less definitive on mask-wearing; the slow adoption of contact-tracing solutions; inflexible safe management measures; and the difficulties in transitioning to an endemic COVID-19 regime (Gov.sg, 2023).

The White Paper highlighted areas that Singapore must address to prepare for the next pandemic: learning to allow for greater flexibility in what to prioritise without letting the “perfect become the

enemy of the good”; the need to strengthen all aspects of Singapore’s resilience in a pandemic; the need to harness the strengths of both citizens and the private sector more in times of crises; the need to build strong public health expertise and organisational capacity to tackle future pandemics; the need to utilise science and technology in such a scenario; and the imperative of delivering transparent and clear communications to the public about decisions made in such uncertain times (Gov.sg, 2023).

Alongside recommendations laid out in the White Paper, Singapore will be establishing the Communicable Diseases Agency (CDA) to be better prepared in handling future pandemics. Announced by Health Minister Mr Ong Ye Kung during a parliamentary debate on the White Paper on 21 March, the CDA will amalgamate the public health functions of the MOH, the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), and the Health Promotion Board (HPB) to promote efforts in disease preparedness, prevention and control, surveillance, risk assessment and response (Khoo, 2023).

It was announced that the Crisis Strategy and Operations Group (CSOG) within MOH that was established during the pandemic, will be retained. The group was in charge of managing contact tracing, home quarantine, transporting patients to isolation facilities, testing, vaccinations and home recovery during the health crisis (Zalizan, 2023a).

In conjunction with these was the introduction of a national plan to speed up responses to future pandemics — the Programme for Research in Epidemic Preparedness and Response, or Prepare. The programme, which will receive S\$100 million over five years, aims to engage in research partnerships, share information and knowledge, and collaborate with institutes throughout the globe (Khalik, 2022).

Parliamentary debate on Singapore’s management of COVID-19

Following the publication of the White Paper, Parliament debated, among other things, why the full report compiled by Mr Ho had not been put before it as well (L. Tang, 2023a).

Initiated by Workers’ Party (WP) Secretary-General, Mr Pritam Singh, and then WP Member of Parliament (MP) Mr Leon Perera, opposition parliamentarians called for the more comprehensive report to be released, citing how the full report on the management of the H1N1 virus outbreak of 2010 had been released in the interest of transparency (L. Tang, 2023a).

In response, DPM Wong assured the House that the government had not withheld any crucial information from the public in choosing to publish the White Paper over Mr Ho’s review (L. Tang, 2023a).

Citing national security and commercial sensitivity concerns, DPM Wong explained that the White Paper was a redacted version of Mr Ho’s report and was arguably more comprehensive because it included information about various ministries’ experience in their fight against COVID-19 (L. Tang, 2023a).

DPM Wong urged the WP to support the government in its transition out of the pandemic. In response, Mr Singh offered his party's support for the national effort in doing so (Iau, 2023a; L. Tang, 2023a)

Budget 2023

Aimed at helping Singaporeans tackle high inflation rates and cost-of-living pressures, an important feature of Budget 2023 was the top-up of S\$3 million to the Assurance Package to be paid to Singaporeans in the form of special cost-of-living payouts, on top of existing cash payouts, as well as higher amounts in Community Development Council (CDC) vouchers (Koh, 2023; Iau, 2023a). Eligible families were also promised higher payouts from the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Voucher scheme to tide them over the period of increased inflation (D. Tham, 2023a).

More financial support for parents was promised, with increases to the Baby Bonus Cash Gift and Child Development Account grants, and a change to the Working Mother's Child Relief which sets the amounts for tax relief at fixed sums instead of a percentage of earned income. Government-paid paternity leave for fathers of Singaporean children born from 1 January 2024 was doubled to four weeks, as was infant-care leave for both parents, from six to 12 days. This would also be available to mothers of Singaporean children that are adopted from 1 January 2024 (Koh, 2023; Iau, 2023b).

Higher taxes on luxury, non-essential goods and private property were announced, with increases in stamp duty rates for higher-value properties, additional registration fees for higher-end cars, and a 15 per cent increase in tobacco excise duty across all tobacco products (Koh, 2023; Iau, 2023b).

It was announced that the Central Provident Fund (CPF) monthly salary ceiling will be raised from S\$6,000 to S\$8,000 by 2026 in gradual increments, beginning in September 2023. This should help workers save a larger portion of their salaries to help with higher retirement costs. No changes were made to the CPF annual salary ceiling (Koh, 2023; N. Lam, 2023; Iau, 2023b).

Budget 2023 also promised wage offsets to employers who hire senior workers 60 years and above earning up to \$4,000 under the Senior Employment Credit scheme from 2023 to 2025, with the Part-Time Re-Employment Grant similarly extended. The government announced it will introduce Jobs-Skills Integrators in certain industries to help enterprises understand the manpower and skills gaps in their respective sectors and work with training providers to plug them. The Uplifting Employment Credit scheme was also introduced to provide wage offsets to employers who hire former offenders (Koh, 2023; Iau, 2023b). For gig or platform workers, those under 30 will have to make CPF contributions along with contributions from their employers, and those earning lower incomes will get transitional support in the first four years of their time on the job (Ong, 2023b).

The policy of tax deductions for donations was extended. The existing 250 per cent tax deduction for donations to institutions of a public character, registered charities, and eligible institutions will be extended until the end of 2026. Additionally, S\$1 billion was added to the Community Silver Trust, a scheme that supports social service agencies that cater to seniors, where the state matches donations these agencies receive, dollar for dollar (Iau, 2023b).

Budget 2023 also sought to address public housing aspirations, which will be discussed in the housing section.

DPM Wong explained that the estimated S\$40 billion drawn in FY2020 to FY2022 from the country's past national reserves in the fight against COVID-19 was unlikely to be returned to the reserves citing the "tight fiscal position" that the city-state remained in. DPM Wong assured the House there was to be no further drawing of the reserves in FY2023, as "things return to normal" (S.K. Tang, 2023a).

Cost of Living

In the wake of the pandemic and the socio-economic uncertainty it brought as well as geopolitical tensions that put pressure on the cost of some essentials, cost-of-living issues became a focal point of discussion in Singapore. Adhering to its principle of being cautious towards universal handouts — for fear of over-reliance on the state and the disincentivising work that might lead to socio-economic stagnation, the government remained committed to targeted support, primarily at those who needed it most (T. Ho, 2021).

In 2023, data indicated the nature of the problem -- the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which considers all household items, was 5.6 per cent in the first half of 2023, and 4.1 per cent in the second half of the year. The annual CPI for households rose by an average of 4.8 per cent (Department of Statistics [DOS], 2023). This took place alongside an increase of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to 8 per cent in 2023 — the first stage in the 2 percentage-point rise to 9 per cent, to be completed by 2024. This was in addition to the increase in prices of electricity, gas and public transport rates, among others (Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore [IRAS], n.d.; Channel News Asia [CNA], 2023a; Pek, 2023).

Cost of living support package

In a response to these trends in costs, on 28 September, DPM Wong announced a S\$1.1 billion cost-of-living support package. In addition to the cash payouts from the Assurance Package to eligible Singaporeans throughout 2023 and the CDC vouchers announced in the Budget, this support package introduced U-Save rebates and public transport vouchers for eligible households to offset the increased costs of such essential services (L. Tang, 2023b).

Parliamentary debate on cost-of-living issues

In a parliamentary debate on cost of living issues on 7 November, a motion was put forward by WP MPs Mr Pritam Singh and Mr Louis Chua, and passed after three significant amendments to it by the PAP MP Mr Liang Eng Hwa. While MPs agreed that rising cost of living will continue to plague Singaporeans in the foreseeable future, the political parties differed in their assessment of and the approach to addressing the issue (Mohan et al., 2023).

WP MPs argued that for some Singaporeans, the situation had become a "cost-of-living crisis" and urged the government to review its policies to lower such pressures on Singaporeans and their

families. They believed these were a result of domestic policy decisions like the GST hike or price increases for water, electricity and transport fares and that lowering such pressures would be more effective than relying on one-time fiscal handouts. Opposition MPs called for more finely-tiered measures in charges for basic utilities so that subsidies can be better targeted at lower-income groups. More broadly, this can also incentivise the conservation of resources (Mohan et al., 2023).

PAP MPs and ministers criticised the WP framing of rising cost of living as a “crisis”, arguing that the term brought about an unnecessary sense of panic and the false perception that Singapore had failed to tackle the problem. It could even imply the need to continue to tap into past reserves (Mohan et al., 2023). They were adamant that a balanced approach in keeping living costs affordable for Singaporeans was the best way forward. Amendments proposed by Mr Liang acknowledged that increases in the cost of living were a global concern, that the government should continue pursuing policies that lower the cost of living but in ways that are fiscally sustainable and that will not burden future generations of Singaporeans (Mohan et al., 2023).

Senior Minister of State for Finance Mr Chee Hong Tat noted that on top of imported inflation, Singapore was also facing rising domestic costs with a tight labour market, low levels of unemployment and rising real wages for workers across the board. The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) kept the Singapore dollar strong to cushion the effect of global inflation, while the state subsidised the basics in life for all but with more help to those who needed it most. He argued that the government had already done much to moderate the impact of rises in costs for low- to middle-income Singaporeans and would continue to track the situation and adopt solutions that will be “fair, sustainable, and effective” (Mohan et al., 2023; Y.H. Goh, 2023b).

Infrastructure

The government introduced a slew of infrastructural developments with the overarching goal of providing more living space and thereby, an improved quality of life for future generations of Singaporeans.

URA Master Plan 2025

Looking into the future of Singapore’s urban landscape, the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s (URA) Master Plan 2025 presented a framework for enhancing Singapore’s liveability over the next 10 to 15 years (Ministry of National Development [MND], n.d.). This is shaped around four themes: creating a healthy and happy city; stewarding our nature and heritage; strengthening urban resilience; and enabling sustainable growth. Each theme has a series of initiatives and actions to be taken by URA to achieve these outcomes (MND, n.d.).

Long Island reclamation project

An extensive multi-ministry effort to create a reservoir, new homes and other amenities, the Long Island reclamation project involves reclaiming three tracts of land amounting to 800 hectares off East Coast Park in the coming decades.

Envisioned as a response to rising sea levels and the threat of inland flooding in the East Coast area, this project is in its planning phase. Technical studies as well as public engagements are underway to ascertain how best to utilise the reclaimed land (Ng & Begum, 2023).

Environmental concerns are also being considered, with experts emphasising the importance of minimising its ecological impact, preserving biodiversity and combating rising sea levels as the main areas of concern in this project. They urged the government to consult public and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for their input on these plans (L. Tang, 2023c).

Mental Health

On 5 October, Singapore launched the National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. The strategy aims to create an effective mental health ecosystem where people can receive holistic support without the fear of stigma (MOH, 2023b).

The new framework will include having more polyclinics provide mental health services, the establishment of new psychiatric facilities and even residential spaces for those at risk of self-harm. A National Mental Health Office will be formed by 2025 to oversee the implementation of the strategy and future mental health care developments, the creation of a mental health helpline and text service, and better public education, especially to parents, on mental health issues (MOH, 2023b).

Health Minister Mr Ong Ye Kung also announced the inclusion of a mental health element in both Healthier SG and Age Well SG (MOH, 2023b; Teo, 2023a).

Climate Change

Singapore reiterated its commitment to reducing carbon emissions and its move towards a greener future.

Curbing “greenwashing”

“Greenwashing” is when an organisation makes misleading sustainability-related claims to investors or consumers to boost its reputation or bottom line. A 2023 report from European environmental, social, and corporate governance data science company RepRisk indicated that greenwashing by banks and other financial service companies around the world rose by 70 per cent compared to 2022 (*The Straits Times* [ST], 2023a).

In conjunction with the UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) held in Dubai in August 2023, the government launched a set of regulations known as the Singapore-Asia Taxonomy, which will apply

to banks and financial institutions that finance green business activities and transitional activities on a pathway to net-zero emissions. Covering the eight key activities — energy, carbon capture and sequestration, agriculture and forestry, industry, construction and real estate, waste and circular economy, information and communications technology, and transportation — the taxonomy seeks to combat greenwashing and help organisations achieve their environmental goals (C. Tan, 2023).

Alongside the new rules, Senior Minister (SM) Mr Teo Chee Hean announced the government's willingness to provide catalytic capital of US\$5 billion (S\$6.7 billion) as part of a blended finance platform to aid in the greening of the region (C. Tan, 2023).

Singapore's first hydrogen-ready power plant

In July, Keppel, along with a consortium comprising Mitsubishi Power Asia-Pacific and Jurong Engineering, broke ground for Singapore's first hydrogen-ready power plant. Called the Keppel Sakra Cogen Plant, it will be built on a brownfield site on land with low levels of biodiversity that has been cleared for urban or industrial use in the western part of the island. The plant aims to be operational by 2026 (C. Tan & Ang, 2023).

Keppel's environmental assessment suggested that the project will have little to no impact on biodiversity in the area, while environmentalists called for further analysis. Despite the fact that the site itself lacks flora and fauna, experts pointed out that certain aspects of biodiversity like migratory birds, and the increase in temperature of seawater around the powerplant resulting from its discharge were significant issues that had been overlooked. The government reassured nature groups that their input will be considered in the construction of the plant (C. Tan & Ang, 2023).

Significant Investments Review Bill

With the goal of strengthening national security, the government introduced a bill late 2023 to regulate significant investments considered critical entities for Singapore. These are entities that are key providers of security-related functions where there are limited or no alternatives.

Reflecting worries about possible disruptions to supply — arising from global contestation and protectionist measures over areas like food and energy, and complementing existing sector-specific legislation in key industries like banking, telecommunications and utilities — the Significant Investments Review Bill was designed to regulate both local and foreign entities gazetted to fall under this new regime (P. Ang, 2023; Chor, 2023).

Crucially, the Bill dictates that these gazetted firms must notify and seek the approval of the Minister for Trade and Industry for changes in ownership or control. These entities will be required to seek similar approval for the appointment of key officers, where the Minister has the right to remove key officers in such entities. Such entities cannot be wound up or dissolved without the Minister's approval. Entities affected can appeal to an independent reviewing tribunal to seek reconsideration of decisions (P. Ang, 2023; Chor, 2023; S.K. Tang & A. Ng, 2024).

The parliamentary debate on the Bill was to take place only in January 2024. On 9 January 2024, Parliament passed the Significant Investments Review Bill with only a single objection from Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Mr Leong Mun Wai (S.K. Tang & A. Ng, 2024). Questions about the Minister for Trade and Industry's wide-ranging powers, the definition of what "national security" entailed, and the impact the Bill might have on business were hotly debated. Specifically, concerns were raised about the Minister's ability to issue a review notice to any entity formed in or carrying out business in Singapore that is deemed to have acted against national interest as well as a clause in the Bill limiting judicial review by the courts (S.K. Tang & A. Ng, 2024).

Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr Gan Kim Yong, responded to both concerns, stating that the government needs such powers to ensure that such stakeholders do not pose a threat to Singapore, and assured the House that he did not expect this to affect the vast majority entities doing business in Singapore. He also believed that the courts would not be suitable as an oversight body in such cases, given that "decisions under the Bill may involve national security considerations and may indeed rely on evidence from intelligence sources that would be highly sensitive." (S.K. Tang & A. Ng, 2024).

On the subject of a clear definition of national security in the context of Singapore, Mr Gan explained that while he had wanted to propose a clear set of criteria by which "national security interests" are defined, he decided against it when he learnt of the experience of other countries and was convinced that taking such an approach would constrain the country's ability to act knowing how quickly the global threat landscape could change and expose Singapore to vulnerabilities (P. Ang, 2023; Chor, 2023; S.K. Tang & A. Ng, 2024).

Regarding the Bill's potential impact on foreign investments into Singapore, Mr Gan reiterated that Singapore's reputation as a trusted hub for businesses was intact, and that the new regulation would only apply to selected entities, balancing the imperatives of maintaining economic competitiveness with national security (P. Ang, 2023; Chor, 2023; S.K. Tang & A. Ng, 2024).

Education

ACS primary school's relocation

On 9 February 2023, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced that the all-boys Anglo-Chinese School (Primary) will move to Tengah from its location at 50 Barker Road and become a co-ed school from 2030. The announcement ignited discussion on several aspects of Singaporean society, most notably on equal opportunities and the competitive nature of education (H. M. Ang, 2023a; Kheng et al., 2023; Quek, 2023; Tseng, 2023).

MOE explained that the plans began with a request by the school to relocate one of its two primary schools to serve the wider Singaporean community in 2022. MOE offered the new housing estate, Tengah, as a suitable place to move one of its campuses, on the condition that ACS admits girls as well (H.M. Ang, 2023a).

While some welcomed the move, a petition to keep ACS (Primary) at its current location and as an all-boys school garnered 3,300 signatures. Not limited to public outcry, articles were written on the reactions to ACS' relocation as part of a wider debate on the pressures of education in Singapore, how the state can better distribute opportunities throughout society, and how willing Singaporeans might be in allowing established institutions to facilitate such changes – especially if they and their children have been the beneficiaries of such a system (Kheng et al., 2023; Quek, 2023; Tseng, 2023).

Changes to A-Level system

With the goal of reducing stress among Singaporean students and giving them greater bandwidth to explore their passions in life, significant changes to the A-Level system were announced in 2023.

First, from 2026, students of junior colleges (JCs) and the Millennia Institute (MI) will not need to include their fourth content-based subject in their university admissions unless it improves their score. Mid-year exams will also be gradually removed for JC and MI students from 2024, in line with the scrapping of such exams at the primary and secondary levels by 2023. The Project Work module of the A-levels will also be removed from the calculation of students' university admission scores, starting with the JC1 intake in 2024 and replaced with a pass or fail grade instead. These changes also mean the maximum university admission score will be 70 instead of 90 (Teng, 2023a).

Education Minister Mr Chan Chun Sing warned that these measures are the furthest that Singapore's education system can go in easing the stress of A-Levels without compromising its academic rigour (Teng, 2023a).

Improving lifelong learning with more access to subsidised university degrees

With the goal of enabling more adults to pursue a university degree later in life, the government is increasing the number of state-subsidised degree programmes, adding some 2,300 more publicly-funded places by 2025. Minister Chan stated that this will be implemented not to feed a "paper chase", but facilitate lifelong learning and help mature workers upskill and reskill to meet the requirements of in-demand industries (Teng, 2023a).

Assistance for disadvantaged students

Disadvantaged students were not left by the wayside. The government moved to expand the existing Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce (UPLIFT) Community Network island-wide. The programme was previously implemented in selected districts.

Aimed at tacking inequality by helping students from lower-income backgrounds stay in school, UPLIFT is targeted at students exhibiting early signs of absenteeism. They are referred to a coordinator in the town's Social Service Office, who will work with their families and the school to ensure the students continue to attend classes as well as help meet their other needs (Teng, 2023b).

To promote mutual understanding and awareness of disabilities, MOE announced in March 2023 that it would be encouraging more interaction among students of across general education and special education schools. This will take place in tandem with efforts to raise the quality of education in the latter group of schools that will include the launching of syllabi in communication and language, and socio-emotional learning that will be rolled out from August 2023 (Teng, 2023b).

Alternative post-secondary opportunities

2023 saw the government announce that it will be expanding options for alternative post-secondary opportunities to suit the learning needs of a diverse society. For those looking to pursue the polytechnic path, the Polytechnic Foundation Programme (PFP), which allows students to apply directly to a polytechnic for a foundation year instead of completing Secondary 5 and O-Levels, will be expanded to include students taking G3 subjects or a mix of G3 and G2 subjects by 2024 (H.M. Ang, 2023b; Teng, 2023b) .

G1, 2 and 3 are the new classifications for subject levels that students can take following the move to full subject-based banding in secondary schools, with G3 being the most challenging in terms of academic rigour (H.M. Ang, 2023b; Teng, 2023b).

Additionally, from 2026, students will be admitted under the PFP in three broad subject groups: first, sciences, design, engineering and technology; second, humanities, art and media; and third, business. They will then be posted to study a specific course (Teng, 2023b).

Institute of Technical Education (ITE) students will also have more options to broaden their skillsets as the ITE launched four new work-study diplomas and three technical diplomas, with over 10 per cent of ITE Nitec and Higher Nitec graduates eligible for these programmes (Teng, 2023b).

Media-Related Issues

From beefing up legislation against online crimes to newspaper circulation controversies and the risk of foreign intervention in local media, 2023 was a year that saw policy developments and debate on the role of media in Singapore and its influence on society.

Fighting online crimes

Given the rise in online crimes, Singapore passed the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA) in July, allowing the government to take down websites, apps and online accounts suspected of being used for nefarious purposes, with the threshold made lower for online scams (D. Tham, 2023b).

OCHA was designed to cover a wide spectrum of online criminal offences, as scam and online crime cases rose by more than 25 per cent from 2021 to hit 33,669 cases in 2022, with victims cheated of a total of S\$660.7 million (US\$498.6 million). As such, MHA emphasised the need to have a lower threshold for blocking any online content that could be a vehicle for such criminal activities (D. Tham, 2023b; D. Tham & Yeoh, 2023).

SPH Media controversy

On 21 June, SPH Media filed a police report over circulation numbers of its print media, which were found to have been inflated by about 10 to 12 per cent than the actual daily average circulation after an investigation by its audit committee. It was revealed that additional copies of newspapers were printed, counted for circulation and then destroyed. There had also been the practice of double-counting subscriptions. Staff who were involved were removed from service, but there was no evidence implicating members of the journalism and editorial departments (C.M. Lee, 2023).

The context to this controversy was the move to take SPH Media out of SPH Holdings in December 2021 to create a not-for-profit company of it. The new entity was to benefit from a grant of up to S\$900 million over five years from the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) starting from 2022 (C.M. Lee, 2023; CNA, 2023b; Y.C. Tham, 2023a).

The Minister for Communications and Information Mrs Josephine Teo clarified that the discovery of this deceit did not change the government's commitment of support; circulation numbers had not been a consideration for the government's support, she explained. Instead, the rationale was to preserve print media amidst severe disruption in the industry, which included the paper of record *The Straits Times*, and key vernacular papers. The support would help the company make essential investments to move it decisively into the digital age. No public money had been lost and the company would be held to task on an on-going basis for the government support it receives (Y.C. Tham, 2023a).

Foreign interference in the media

On 24 July 2023, American-based news organisation *The Washington Post* (WAPo) published an article titled "In Singapore, loud echoes of Beijing's positions generate anxiety", which analysed *Lianhe Zaobao*, the flagship Chinese language newspaper of SPH Media Trust. The article expressed concerns towards *Lianhe Zaobao's* connections with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the fact that a large portion of its readership base was mainland Chinese (Mahtani & Chandradas, 2023).

In essence, the WAPo article warned that *Lianhe Zaobao* could be a conduit for pushing the Singaporean public and by extension, the nation itself to gradually align itself closer to China and its interests, especially given Beijing's campaign to cultivate positive ties with overseas Chinese communities, and that a good portion of Singapore's Chinese-majority population continues to have a positive view of China (Mahtani & Chandradas, 2023).

Lianhe Zaobao responded to the WAPo article by stating that its only objective was to be a highly respected Chinese language newspaper, and that this involved publishing opinions that were both critical and supportive of China; that the only narrative it represented in its writings was that of Singapore's (Y.L. Lim, 2023).

Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong echoed this sentiment at *Lianhe Zaobao's* centennial celebratory gala dinner on 29 September. He argued that the paper continued to fulfil its role as a Chinese language publication — upholding integrity and presenting voices and perspectives throughout Asia regardless of their affiliations — and only represent the interests of Singapore. He reiterated that *Lianhe Zaobao* had an integral role in building Singapore's multi-ethnic identity by promoting a good command of the Chinese language (Chin, 2023).

National Day Rally

On 18 August 2023, PM Lee addressed the nation at the annual National Day Rally (NDR). He said that the nation's fight against COVID-19 had ended, noting that the city-state had survived many similarly bleak predicaments and national crises in the past. Acknowledging the period of uncertainty that Singapore faced, he encouraged Singaporeans to trust in the fourth-generation (4G) leaders and support them as stewards of Singapore (CNA, 2023c; G. Ho, 2023a; Lee et al., 2023).

Aside from announcing significant policy changes, PM Lee also cited the 100th birth anniversary of founding prime minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 2023 as a good time for the nation to reflect on its national values and ideals as it sought to refresh its social compact (Y.I. Lee et al., 2023).

In the speech, PM Lee stated the government's commitment to doing well in five areas of governance: managing the cost of living; providing fair and affordable housing; promoting employment and employability; responding to the trend of ageing and ensuring retirement adequacy; and upholding political integrity and facilitating political succession (Y.I. Lee et al., 2023).

Majulah Generation package

Beginning with ageing and retirement adequacy, PM Lee announced the introduction of the *Majulah Package*. This is a financial support scheme that will see “young seniors” aged 50 and above in 2023, or born in 1973 or earlier, receive money in their CPF and MediSave accounts. The government will set aside S\$7 billion for this package, which will benefit roughly 1.4 million older Singaporeans in total, including those of the Merdeka and Pioneer generations, (Mohan, 2023a).

The *Majulah Package* will be paid out to eligible citizens in three components. First, an Earn and Save Bonus that contributes up to S\$1,000 into CPF accounts of low- and middle-income workers. Next, there is a one-time Retirement Savings Bonus of up to S\$1,500 for those who have not met the CPF Basic Retirement Sum, which will be especially helpful to those who have not been working, such as homemakers. There will also be a one-time MediSave Bonus of up to S\$1,000 (Mohan, 2023a).

The government explained that the benefits are means-tested to ensure that the package is distributed equitably. The eligibility criteria for the various benefits will include factors such as income, annual value of homes, how many properties an individual owns, as well as their CPF savings (Mohan, 2023a).

Support for workers

In response to feedback received through the Forward Singapore engagements on retrenched workers, PM Lee announced financial support for this segment of Singaporeans during the NDR (L. Lee, 2023).

He acknowledged that those who were “involuntarily unemployed” faced immense anxiety to simply accept whatever jobs they can find as quickly as possible, rather than take the time to reskill. PM Lee explained that this transitional support scheme was being “fine-tuned”, and more details would be shared by the 4G leadership team as they completed the Forward Singapore exercise (L. Lee, 2023).

Public Housing

Issues to do with Singapore’s public housing system were highly contentious and hotly debated in Parliament throughout 2023. Following construction delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in prices of resale flats due to the supply crunch, improving the affordability and accessibility of public housing was a crucial objective for the government (Chua, 2024).

Some 23,000 new flats were launched in 2023, with Minister of National Development Desmond Lee assuring Singaporeans that 100,000 homes will be built by 2025. He said that the government would “turn the corner soon” on meeting the demand for flats, and acknowledged that oversubscription rates for new flats remained high (Kang, 2023; MND, 2023a; M. Ng, 2023).

Parliamentary debate on affordable and accessible public housing

The most significant debate on public housing was the Parliamentary Motion on Affordable and Accessible Public Housing on 7 February 2023, where the WP and the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) offered their views on how best to address the affordability and accessibility issues, with PAP MPs rebutting their policy suggestions (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

Believing Singapore’s public housing system to be fundamentally broken, the PSP called for a reset. As part of their motion, PSP NCMPs Mr Leong Mun Wai and Ms Hazel Poa suggested an “Affordable Home Scheme” that defers land costs from BTO purchases, only to be paid if the flat is sold on the resale market. Additionally, they proposed a Millennial Apartments Scheme — a large stock of “quality flats” near the central business district for young Singaporeans to rent for two to five years. Mr Leong also expressed concern that the ability for Singaporeans to use their CPF monies to purchase flats had led them to deplete their savings and compromise their retirement adequacy (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

National Development Minister Mr Desmond Lee and Senior Minister of State for National Development Ms Sim Ann responded to the PSP’s proposals. Mr Lee stressed the need for sustainable improvements to the system, reiterating that public housing is broadly affordable and accessible for most Singaporeans, and that the government will introduce shorter waiting times for

BTO flats in 2024 and consider more support for first-time buyers to purchase resale flats (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

Ms Sim saw the PSP's proposals as perplexing, arguing that their proposed Affordable Home Scheme was "super low price upon entry", which could potentially drive up demand for new flats. She also rejected the PSP's Millennial Apartments Scheme idea, stating that home ownership remains a significant aspect of nation-building, reinforcing the government's decision to keep rental housing "very targeted" (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

From the WP, Mr Pritam Singh expressed his party's decision to vote in favour of the PSP's motion. He clarified that WP did not fully endorse PSP's proposals, but he felt their ideas warranted further study. He suggested an amendment to Mr Lee's motion on public housing to read: "That this house ... calls on the government to intensify its efforts to meet these twin goals [of housing affordability and accessibility]" (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023). The WP also agreed with the PSP's concerns about using CPF funds to purchase one's flat, with WP MP Dr Jamus Lim raising the issue of lease decay as an additional factor that was a threat to Singaporeans' retirement adequacy (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

Other WP MPs also proposed suggestions on flat supply and prices. Mr Leon Perera proposed more flats to be built ahead of demand more frequently, as well as selling some at 70-year leases with the option for topping up another 29 years (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023). Mr Gerald Giam suggested restricting the concurrent ownership of HDB and private property. As HDB flat owners are allowed to buy private property without selling their flat if they met the Minimum Occupation Period (MOP) and pay the Additional Buyers' Stamp Duty (ABSD), Mr Giam noted that in October 2022, about 3 per cent of HDB flat owners also held at least one private property, with 45 per cent of them not living in their flats, translating to around 15,000 flats that were not occupied by their owners. He suggested incentivising these owners to sell their HDB flats by rebating the ABSD they had paid at the time of purchasing the private property (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

Mr Giam also proposed building more two-room Flexi flats for seniors to right-size their flats. PAP MP Ms Nadia Samdin suggested a "stage-of-life housing grant" to motivate young couples to pick the right-sized flat for their first home in terms of space and price. Ms Nadia also raised the possibility of increasing the supply of three-room flats in the resale market by reducing the MOP from five to three years (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

Minister Lee labelled Mr Singh's amendment as a political move, and an attempt to mischaracterise the government as "sitting on our laurels and therefore necessitating this late amendment", which he felt was misplaced (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

Additionally, Ms Sim responded to Dr Lim's concerns about using CPF for housing purchases, noting that in Singapore, home ownership did not entirely fund one's retirement needs, and policies like the CPF LIFE annuity scheme exists to supplement the store of value in one's flat. Ms Sim also reiterated the government's commitment to ensuring strong economic conditions to keep flats valuable. Such

factors could help counter the decrease in their value as a result of their decaying leases (Mohan & D. Tham, 2023).

In his closing speech, Minister Lee reiterated the government's commitment to ensuring the stability of Singapore's public housing ecosystem; to do so responsibly and not deplete the government's resources (MND, 2023b).

Budget 2023 housing changes

Budget 2023 saw an announcement of a series of housing policy developments to tackle both the affordability and accessibility issues.

Beginning with accessibility, the First-Timer (Parents and Married Couples) category was introduced. Couples with at least one Singaporean child aged 18 and below, and married couples aged 40 and below who never owned or sold a residential property and have not been able to book a flat from the BTO or Sale of Balance Flats exercises in the past five years, will be given an additional ballot — which would be a total of three chances to apply for a flat under the new scheme (MND, 2023c; Seow, 2023).

For affordability of resale flats, the CPF Housing Grant was raised from S\$50,000 to S\$80,000 for eligible families purchasing four-room or smaller resale flats for the first time, and from \$40,000 to \$50,000 for those buying five-room or larger flats with immediate effect (Iau, 2023b). The Housing and Development Board (HDB) would state at the start of 2024 that some S\$505.2 million was given out to 10,400 buyers of resale flats through these grants from February to December 2023 (Liew, 2024).

NDR 2023 housing policy changes

A significant reform to the public housing system was also announced at NDR2023. Flats would be reclassified into “Prime, Plus and Standard” flats in the second half of 2024. The new system did away with the “mature” and “non-mature” estate nomenclature and changed the sale conditions to justify larger subsidies to flats in more desirable locations, thereby improving affordability (Chew, 2023a, 2023b).

New flats in the most desired locations, especially those close to the city centre will be designated as “Prime” flats, while new flats in choice locations within each region across Singapore will be designated as “Plus” flats. More generous subsidies will be offered for “Prime” and “Plus” flats compared to the “Standard” flats — the most common type of flat. However, unlike “Standard” flats, they will have stricter conditions of ownership and resale such as a 10-year MOP and a clawback of the additional subsidies provided on top of the typical subsidies for “Standard” flats. Existing flats will not be affected by this new system that will be fully implemented the second half of 2024 (Chew, 2023a, 2023b; Khairunan, 2023).

Singles will also be able to apply for two-room Flexi flats of all types and across the island in the new classification. As for the resale market, they will be able to buy all flats except 3Gen ones, and specifically for the Prime scheme, they will be restricted to buying two-room flats (Chew, 2023c).

As Singapore continues on its path to becoming a super-aged society, it was also announced that homes will be made more senior-friendly. The existing Enhancement for Active Seniors (EASE) programme will be upgraded into EASE 2.0. Under EASE, installation of fittings such as ramps and grab bars are subsidised to improve mobility and safety for seniors. EASE 2.0 will see more options for such fittings (H.M. Ang, 2023c).

Streets and linkways frequented by seniors will be revamped to be more accommodating — there will be longer green-man signals at pedestrian crossings and more exercise areas to help citizens age actively and gracefully (H.M. Ang, 2023c).

Pilot programme for rental serviced apartments

The government will conduct a pilot programme for a new class of serviced apartments, with a minimum stay duration of three months. This is in response to the desire of young Singaporeans for alternative forms of rental public housing and will help the government gauge market demand of these longer-stay rental dwellings. The pilot will start with two sites at Upper Thomson Road and Zion Road in the second half of 2023 and will coexist with smaller, existing rental serviced apartments with shorter seven-day minimum stay requirements (Chan, 2023).

Conclusion of Forward Singapore Exercise

The 4G leaders' Forward Singapore initiative drew to a close in November after engaging 200,000 people in 16 months. The same month saw the launch of its report, presented as a roadmap for refreshing the social compact between the government and citizens and among citizens in the midst of global uncertainty and innumerable socio-economic issues (T. Ho, 2023; Yeoh, 2023a).

The engagement found that Singaporeans characterise the Singapore Dream now to go beyond just material goods and as living a purpose-driven and fulfilling life. They want a society that is vibrant and inclusive, fair and thriving, and resilient and united. While Singaporeans felt there were principles that the nation should continue to live by to thrive — such as economic competitiveness, they were willing to challenge well-established norms to create a more equitable society (T. Ho, 2023; Y.H. Goh, 2023b; Yeoh, 2023a).

Seven key shifts

Highlighting crucial areas in which Singapore's socio-economic framework can be addressed to create a more equitable society, the Forward Singapore exercise recommended seven key shifts.

Beginning with supporting families through every stage of their lives (and as described in the foregoing section on Mental Health developments), the National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy was launched to address mental well-being (Yeoh, 2023a).

Second, Forward Singapore focused on underappreciated jobs, especially the “hands” and “heart” jobs, i.e., tradespeople and those working in the healthcare and care sectors. It aimed to give disadvantaged workers a boost, such as by providing greater subsidies for obtaining a polytechnic diploma to ITE graduates and topping up their CPF when they graduate, as well as by providing “involuntarily unemployed jobseekers” subsistence and funding for reskilling so that they can access better jobs (S.K. Tang, 2023b; Yeoh, 2023a).

Third, Forward Singapore expanded on the notion of education that goes beyond one’s grades, such as the move to full subject-based banding in secondary schools from 2024 onwards, alongside a significant boost to SkillsFuture to help mid-career Singaporeans aged 40 and above upskill or reskill. The latter is through a substantial top-up of SkillsFuture credit, to the tune of S\$4,000, to attain publicly-funded diplomas (Yeoh, 2023a).

Fourth, the report recommended the empowerment of those in need, by closing “early gaps” within low-income households. This will enable such households to climb the socio-economic ladder through their own effort — for instance, with the UPLIFT programme to raise primary school attendance among these households, as well as extend full childcare subsidies to lower-income families based on their income tier (Yeoh, 2023a).

The Ministry for Social and Family Development (MSF) will enhance the Community Link (ComLink) programme with ComLink+, which will support families with young children who live in public rental flats achieve homeownership and other objectives towards social mobility (Yeo, 2023).

Monetary assistance is divided into four packages, with the first aimed at lower preschool enrolment and attendance rates of children in low-income households, coming as a one-off top-up of S\$500 to the Child Development Account (CDA) of families who enrol their child in preschool by age three, as well as an additional S\$200 for every quarter of the year in which the child has achieved an over 75 per cent attendance rate in preschool (Yeo, 2023).

The second package is tied to stable employment. Here, up to two working family members who find or sustain a CPF-paying job that each pays at least S\$1,400 monthly will receive a combination of cash and CPF payouts for S\$450 to S\$550 for every quarter of a year of sustained employment. The top-ups that aim at encouraging stable employment are capped at S\$30,000 in total payouts across this package and takes into account the fourth package as well, which is tied to homeownership (Yeo, 2023).

The third package is targeted at ensuring families clear their debts, and comes as a one-to-one matched debt repayment scheme for families with money owed to licensed institutions with trackable repayments. Under this scheme, every dollar repaid to creditors by the family will be directly matched

by a donor to creditors. Donors can only match repayments up to a limit of S\$5,000 in total debt repaid, which means that their maximum support is S\$2,500. Families can only benefit from this package once, and those who are receiving ComCare assistance are ineligible as this suggests to MSF that a family has yet to attain financial sustainability in meeting their basic needs (Yeo, 2023).

The fourth and last package aims at helping low-income families own their own flats, and will be co-funded by the government and a donor. It is geared towards helping families build their savings by matching and supplementing their voluntary contributions to CPF. For every S\$1 contributed by eligible families, a S\$2 top-up will be made to selected family members' CPF ordinary accounts. Linked to the package for stable employment, the top-ups under this package are subject to an overall limit of S\$30,000 in total payouts (Yeo, 2023).

Under the existing ComLink scheme, families receive assistance with setting goals and are referred to relevant partner agencies for support, with ComLink officers guiding them through the process. Under ComLink+, they will get support from family coaches for more tailored support as these households embark on their path towards socio-economic stability (Yeo, 2023).

The fifth objective of Forward Singapore is to enable seniors to age well in the community. Senior-friendly flats will be introduced in the public housing system, alongside the Majulah Package to boost retirement savings, and the creation of Age Well SG — a multi-ministry initiative aimed at helping Singaporeans age actively. This will be done by improving their physical living environment, introducing programmes to encourage active ageing, and to strengthening support for seniors with care needs. A sum of S\$800 million to be spent over five years has been set aside for this initiative (Age Well SG, 2023; Teo, 2023b; Yeoh, 2023a).

Forward Singapore's sixth shift was to steward the country's limited resources responsibly and sustainably in the areas of environmental resources, food and water security, and upholding fiscal prudence and responsibility. How each generation pays for these developments are expected in challenging discussions ahead (Yeoh, 2023a).

Forward Singapore's seventh, and final shift is to build the collective strength of Singapore's society, which will be needed to address the challenges ahead. This will be done through the strengthening of multiracialism and the Singaporean identity, alongside more avenues for civic participation – with the goal of reinforcing trust in society and by extension, its unity (Yeoh, 2023a).

Changes to Policies Regarding Work

Alongside public housing, concerns regarding the future of work in Singapore was a significant talking point amongst both the public and policymakers. Aside from the job-related assistance rolled out in Budget 2023 and the NDR, the government adopted other significant labour policies.

Employees of strategic importance

To ensure both the quality of foreign workers coming into Singapore and their relevance to needs in key industries, the Complementarity Assessment Framework (COMPASS) announced in 2022 was implemented on 1 September 2023, with two new bonus criteria.

COMPASS was introduced to highlight to firms the industries that required Employment Pass (EP) applicants, to supplement manpower needs and to grow these sectors locally (Boo, 2023a; Economic Development Board [EDB], 2023; Yang, 2022). EP applicants are assessed under a points-based framework. They must meet the qualifying salary of S\$5,000 (S\$5,500 for applicants intending to work in the financial sector) and score at least 40 points within its rubric to be eligible for an EP in Singapore. Points are awarded based on how applicants' salaries compare against local professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs); on whether the applicant improves nationality diversity within their organisation; on their qualifications; and on their organisation's share of local PMETs within its subsector (Boo, 2023a; EDB, 2023).

Additional points can be awarded if applicants meet the Shortage Occupation List (SOL) which comprises 27 occupations that lack participation from local PMETs (such as financial consultants and artificial intelligence scientists); as well as a Strategic Economic Priorities (SEP) bonus — where firms must show that they are developing the local workforce; and are supported by a sector agency or the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). To qualify, firms must also be in a programme run by the EDB, Enterprise Singapore, the Maritime and Port Authority (MPA), the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) or the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) (Boo, 2023a; EDB, 2023).

Additionally, while the SOL will be reviewed every three years (or annually where required), firms are required to score at least 10 points each on diversity as well as supporting local employment by having local PMET staff in their subsector within three years to keep the SEP bonus (Boo, 2023a; EDB, 2023).

Foreign workers in the service sector

In addition to highly skilled foreigners to work in key industries, the service and manufacturing sectors saw greater options allowing them to hire more overseas staff also. Housekeepers and porters were added to the Non-Traditional Sources Occupation List (NTS OL) (Tay, 2023a).

Unveiled during the 2022 Budget debate, the NTS OL was implemented to help firms adjust to the S Pass qualifying salary and levy increases by allowing them access to NTS Work Permit holders for occupations with pressing manpower needs but which remain difficult to automate. It also supports Singapore's longer-term shift to be manpower-lean, and addresses the industries' manpower needs while balancing local employment outcomes (MOM, 2023; Tay, 2023a).

When service-oriented businesses like hotels struggled to employ staff as activity picked up after the pandemic, the government decided to provide them with greater hiring options (Tay, 2023a). From 1

September 2023, these employers could hire from the NTS nations of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. These workers must be paid at least S\$2,000 a month in fixed wages and account for no more than 8 per cent of the workforce in the organisation, excluding EP holders (Tay, 2023a).

Workplace fairness

While maintaining economic growth remains one of Singapore's highest public policy priorities, a large part of policy discussions on labour laws in 2023 focused on ensuring workplaces remain human-centric and fair.

The government has been drafting the Workplace Fairness Legislation (WFL), which comprises 22 recommendations and builds on 20 interim measures and is slated to be passed in the second half of 2024 (Boo, 2023b). The WFL will ensure that employers set up processes to handle employees' grievances about discriminatory practices. It is designed to complement two other significant workplace legislation frameworks — the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (Tafep) which covers the adoption of fair employment practices, and the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM) which handles employment disputes (Boo, 2023b).

Covering all stages of employment including the hiring process, employers cannot indicate partiality for certain characteristics in job advertisements such as, but not limited to, nationality, age, sex, marital status, pregnancy status, caregiving responsibilities as well as race, religion, language, disability and mental health conditions. Exceptions are made for specific businesses based on their workplace environments, such as social groups that support workers with disabilities. Specific exemptions are given to firms with fewer than 25 staff, and religious organisations (Boo, 2023b).

When employers receive a complaint, they must investigate it thoroughly, document and explain the findings to the employee while maintaining the latter's confidentiality. The WFL prohibits retaliation against staff who report workplace discrimination such as through dismissal, salary deduction or harassment (Boo, 2023b).

The government explained that the draft WFL was sufficiently comprehensive, and based on 95 per cent of complaints that relevant ministries had received on workplace discrimination in the past. It avoided imposing very wide and detailed legal obligations as this might strain employee-employer relationships (Boo, 2023b).

Flexible work arrangements

The government recognised the growing relevance of flexible work arrangements (FWA), given the prevalence of these during the pandemic and the greater caregiver responsibilities faced by workers as Singapore becomes a super-aged society (Tay, 2023b).

A tripartite workgroup comprising representatives from the Singapore National Employers Federation, NTUC and the government was tasked to develop a set of national guidelines on FWA (Tay, 2023b).

Expected to be launched in 2024, the Tripartite Guidelines on FWA will be implemented to help employers and employees adopt them in their workflows and recommend ways to promote effective and sustainable use of them (Tay, 2023b).

Platform workers

Recognising the rising popularity of platform work, the government accepted a recommendation by a tripartite group for greater representation of such “own-account” workers who take up piecemeal work on digital platforms. Citing their lack of protection compared to formal employees, the government intends to address this gap in the second half of 2024 but with no plans to extend them to other freelance or gig workers for the foreseeable future (Zalizan, 2023b).

The recommendations by the tripartite workgroup cover three broad areas: representation for platform workers; negotiations between workers and operators; and the need for mechanisms for proper dispute resolution. Recognising the complexity of the platform worker-operator relationship, the government intends to make these guidelines as flexible as possible to adapt to this ever-changing industry (Zalizan, 2023b).

Artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace

Singapore’s approach to new generative AI technology is to allow for its use while minimising the risks it might present, as some workplaces have started to adopt it (Chia, 2023a).

In June 2023, the IMDA and Singaporean software company Aicadium released a paper on the implementation strategy for generative AI. The paper cited the six key risks of AI: mistakes and hallucinations; privacy and confidentiality; disinformation, toxicity and online threats; copyright challenges; embedded bias; and values and alignment. It proposed a balanced approach in implementing this new technology and outlined key principles that Singapore has to align itself to when doing so (IMDA & Aicadium, 2023).

Alongside the paper and updates to Singapore’s National AI Strategy, technology giants like Google and Microsoft formed an alliance with the IMDA to address future issues that AI could pose — such as its bias, copyright infringements, and its susceptibility to misinformation. Minister for Communications and Information Mrs Josephine Teo said the alliance with the commercial sector comprising over 60 industry players, which resulted in the creation of the AI Verify Foundation, will discuss best practices and standards, and create a neutral platform for collaboration on governing AI in the workplace (Chia, 2023b).

Its members will contribute to a software toolkit developed by IMDA that analyses datasets and AI code to check for bias, transparency and AI-related issues. Citing generative AI's well-documented limitations and the ease with which it can be used for malicious intent, the government expressed the need for this partnership with industry leaders to bring about the responsible integration of trustworthy AI in mainstream uses (Chia, 2023b).

Keppel Bribery Case

In January 2023, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) investigated six former employees of Keppel Offshore & Marine (Keppel O&M) over bribe payments amounting to US\$55 million (S\$73 million) to foreign consultants involved in Keppel O&M's business interests in Brazil. These funds were allegedly channelled to officials of Brazilian state-owned company Petrobras and other firms related to rig-building contracts that were awarded to Keppel O&M. An investigation by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), as well as Brazilian and Singaporean authorities unveiled these practices, and Keppel O&M was fined US\$422 million and had to fulfil all obligations under a conditional warning in lieu of prosecution, issued by all three countries' investigating bodies (R. Ang, 2023).

Thereafter, the CPIB and the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) announced they would not prosecute the six Keppel employees for their involvement in the bribes to Brazilian officials as they did not have the evidence to establish these employees' guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The former Keppel officers were let off with stern warnings (L. Lam, 2023a).

Given the severity of the case, criticism was levelled at the government. Senior Counsel Harpreet Nehal Singh questioned the decision not to prosecute the six men in a commentary on online legal blog, *Singapore Law Watch*. Mr Singh expressed concern that this decision of AGC signalled "a crack in Singapore's long professed policy of zero tolerance towards corruption." He felt unease with the decision, given the amount of evidence available and accessible to prosecutors, and the fact that the six individuals were clearly within Singapore's jurisdiction (L. Lam, 2023a).

This prompted a response on social media by Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Ms Indranee Rajah who stated that some individuals were commenting on the case based on an inadequate understanding of the facts. Singh's commentary was subsequently removed by the managers of the blog with the Academy of Law explaining that the article "was not within the editorial parameters of *Singapore Law Watch*" (L. Lam, 2023a).

Responding to a parliamentary debate on the matter on 6 February, Ms Indranee explained that the CPIB and AGC were unable to compel key foreign witnesses to testify in this extra-territorial case of corruption, and none who were investigated by the CPIB implicated themselves or anyone else involved in this case, making a conviction unlikely (L. Tang & Yeoh, 2023).

She reiterated that this meant that there was “a lack of sufficient evidence, either documentary or through witnesses, which would establish any criminal charge beyond a reasonable doubt against a specific individual.” (L. Tang & Yeoh, 2023).

Although the six ex-Keppel staff had received stern warnings, she explained that warnings were not unusual in cases like these, especially with limited evidence and/or public interest to prosecute, and that the CPIB issued an average of 138 warnings annually and prosecuted 139 individuals from 2017-2021. However, she also made clear that these warnings could be re-evaluated by the public prosecutor if new evidence were to come to light (L. Tang & Yeoh, 2023).

Ms Indranee reiterated that Singapore maintains its zero-tolerance towards all forms of corruption, but also noted the need to uphold due process and the rules of its own legal proceedings in prosecuting those suspected of such crimes (L. Tang & Yeoh, 2023).

Billion-Dollar Money Laundering Case

On 15 August 2023, Singapore police seized roughly a billion Singapore dollars’ worth of assets from 10 foreign nationals residing here, in the country’s largest anti-money-laundering operation. While they held citizenship from various nations, all 10 suspects were originally from mainland China, with some still possessing Chinese passports. None were Singaporean citizens or PRs. Among the assets seized, prohibition of disposal orders was issued against 94 private properties and 50 high-end vehicles, alongside bottles of vintage wine and other luxury goods (Andres, 2023; CNA, 2023d).

The illicit operation was discovered after financial institutions filed reports about suspicious transactions to the MAS almost two years prior, which led to investigations and eventually, the raids. This reinforced Singapore’s continued stance against financial crimes including money laundering and the capability as well as the will of authorities here to prosecute people guilty of them (Andres, 2023; CNA, 2023d).

Youth Voices in Policymaking

Acknowledging the need to hear the concerns of young Singaporeans, the government announced it would form youth panels under the auspices of the National Youth Council to provide opportunities for them to engage stakeholders and policymakers on policy issues, understand the processes of policymaking, and ultimately, make suggestions on public policy to the government (S. Ang, 2023).

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Mr Edwin Tong announced that his ministry would set up two to three such panels in 2023, each comprising 20–30 young Singaporeans to discuss topics that resonate with them. Panellists can suggest topics too and the ministry will announce new ones when appropriate (S. Ang, 2023).

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Lee Kuan Yew Centenary Celebrations

In 2023, various organisations in Singapore marked founding prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's birth centenary. PM Lee highlighted the values by which his father and fellow pioneer leaders founded independent Singapore, and expressed the hope that young Singaporeans would be inspired by them as they address the issues their generation faces (Cheng, 2023).

There were publications, exhibitions and even a Lee Kuan Yew Centennial Fund established through private donations to support students' education and development (Cheng, 2023; Wong, 2023). Two conferences exploring the challenges that Singapore and Southeast Asia would face in the foreseeable future — the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Reinventing Destiny, and the Asia Future Summit 2023 — paid tribute to the late Mr Lee's legacy, his nation-building efforts and strategic foresight (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy [LKYSPP], n.d.; ST, 2023b).

In his tribute to the late Mr Lee, DPM Mr Heng Swee Keat — who was the former's principal private secretary — described three takeaways from his experience working with him. The first is to find one's purpose and pursue it with passion and dedication — and for the late Mr Lee, it was Singapore's survival and success; the second is to take a strategic long-term view of things — and certainly the late Mr Lee applied that to securing the country's key interests like its water resources; and third is to be adaptable and be unafraid to innovate — which was what the late Mr Lee did in accepting changes to the policy on bilingualism for example (Cheng, 2023).

Developments in the Opposition

2023 also saw opposition parties in Singapore create alliances and make displays of unity in preparation for the next General Election (GE) with the overarching goal of forming a more unified front in challenging the PAP (Iau, 2023c).

They explained the desire to avoid multi-cornered contests, the possibility of sharing candidates during elections, creating joint manifestos for the next GE which has to be held before November 2025, or the requisite three months after the final day in August 2025 it can be called, that is, the day the current parliamentary term that ends its five-year term (Iau, 2023c).

The National Solidarity Party (NSP), Red Dot United (RDU), Singapore People's Party (SPP) and Singapore United Party (SUP) formed an alliance in October called "The Coalition", described as a "non-formal partnership" supported by shared core principles and electoral strategies. With a stronger force, they aim to provide a more powerful check and balance on the government and contest not just the five constituencies they did separately in 2020 GE but eight to 10 constituencies in the next one (Iau, 2023c, 2023d; Y.C. Tham, 2023b).

A second grouping, called the "People's Alliance", was formed by People's Voice (PV), the Reform Party (RP), People's Power Party (PPP) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in response to

what they said was Singaporeans' call for opposition unity. Stating that they would establish the alliance formally with the Registry of Societies, they announced a manifesto around critical issues affecting the prosperity of the people. They declared they would contest in all the seats the parties had in GE2020 and more (Iau, 2023c, 2023d; Y.C. Tham, 2023b).

Progress Singapore Party (PSP)'s founder and chairman at the time, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, also expressed interest in forming an alliance led by his party (Iau, 2023d).

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) hosted a luncheon with representatives of 11 other opposition parties where they discussed various issues and exchanged ideas. Crucially, the parties said they agreed to work towards denying the PAP the two-thirds supermajority in Parliament to prevent its MPs from altering the Constitution at a whim (Rifhan, 2023).

Tin Pei Ling and the Private Sector

On 1 February, local technology and platform company Grab announced that PAP MP Ms Tin Pei Ling had been appointed Director of Public Affairs and Policy of its Singapore operations since January, citing her experience in public affairs and governance as reasons for doing so. Ms Tin's employment raised concerns from the public, and reignited debate over the full- or part-time occupations that other MPs have alongside their public duties and the potential conflicts of interest that might arise (Lim, 2023; Yeoh, 2023b). Following this public disquiet, Ms Tin moved to a corporate development role within Grab nine days later (Begum, 2023).

While noting Ms Tin's statements that she would always put her public duties as a MP first, she also drew attention to the fact that both Grab as well as PAP guidelines towards codes of conduct did not explicitly prohibit anyone in politics for taking up a public affairs role. Professor (Practice) of Accounting at NUS Business School Mr Mak Yuen Teen, an expert in corporate governance, recognised that Grab's place in Singapore's business ecosystem alongside the increased scrutiny towards its treatment and employment of gig workers — as significant reasons for why Singaporeans were concerned about Ms Tin's employment. As Director of Public Affairs, Prof Mak said that Ms Tin could potentially be caught between communicating Grab's agenda to the state and her responsibilities of representing the needs of the public through her MP role (Lim, 2023; Yong, 2022; Mak, 2023).

Aljunied-Hougang Town Council Civil Suits

On 7 July, the Court of Appeal ruled on the liability of WP leaders embroiled in the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC) civil suit. This marks another chapter in the years-long civil case regarding the WP's management of the town council (L. Lam, 2023b).

With regard to the WP leaders involved, the court found WP chairman Ms Sylvia Lim and former party Secretary-General Mr Low Thia Khiang liable for failures in the control systems for the payments process that led to the risk of overpayment, noting that the claims had been clearly put to them during

the trial. The court however found WP chief Mr Pritam Singh not liable for negligence in the AHTC payments as he had not been given the chance to defend himself — AHTC lawyers did not plead the case, cross-examine him on the issue, nor make any closing submissions on his role (L. Lam, 2023b; Y.C. Tham, 2023c).

Previously, the court had also held all three senior WP leaders as well as four others liable to Sengkang Town Council (STC) for permitting control failures in the payment processes. Alongside the AHTC lawsuit, a separate ongoing suit brought up by Pasir-Ris-Punggol Town Council (PRPTC) to recover losses incurred by Punggol East when the constituency was being managed by WP from 2013 to 2015, was transferred to STC after the WP won Sengkang Group Representation Constituency (GRC) in the 2020 GE. Sengkang GRC absorbed Punggol East ward, which was previously run by the PRPTC. Though the two cases were heard together, the court ruled that the claims made by each party had to be kept distinct (Y.C. Tham, 2023c).

In 2019, it was determined that Mr Low and Ms Lim had breached their fiduciary duties to AHTC, and Mr Singh, his duties of skill and care. The defendants appealed, and in 2022, the court ruled that the town councillors and employees did not owe fiduciary or equitable duties of skill and care to AHTC. The court noted, however, that they were still negligent in certain aspects like the payment processes, and could be liable for damages (Y.C. Tham, 2023c).

On 22 August, the MND sought information on the powers and duties of the WP leaders in relation to their involvement in AHTC's payment and procurement processes as well as further actions AHTC would take to manage the risks, in light of the court's findings on 7 July (CNA, 2023e).

Given two weeks to reply, AHTC responded that Ms Lim had no direct involvement in AHTC's procurement and payment processes, and Mr Singh was on the tenders and contracts committee. AHTC argued that their current positions allowed them to discharge their duties with no conflicts of interest. It also made clear to the MND that it felt no further action was needed in light of the court's findings, and reminded MND that an auditor had already found AHTC compliant with the Town Council Act on 14 February 2018, alongside a subsequent audit in FY2019 as well as governance checks since FY2021–2022 (CNA, 2023e).

Ridout Road Investigations

On 6 May, Reform Party (RP) Secretary-General Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam wrote a blog post about the residences of Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Law, and Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Both were living in state-owned, conserved black-and-white bungalows at 26 Ridout Road and 31 Ridout Road, respectively (Y.C. Tham, 2023d).

Mr Jeyaretnam questioned if the ministers had received preferential treatment in renting these state properties; if they were paying rental sums that were commensurate with market rates; and if so, how they could afford the rents. He also accused them of making illegal changes to the land and property as well as using public funds to pay for developments to the property. Investigations were carried out

into the ministers' process of securing these properties and the agreed-upon rents (Y.C. Tham, 2023d).

Despite assurances from the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) that both ministers had rented the properties through a bidding process and paid the guide price (which is the reserve price) with Mr Shanmugam as the sole bidder for 26 Ridout Road and Dr Balakrishnan the highest bidder for 31 Ridout Road, public interest prompted PM Lee to direct the CPIB to investigate the matter on 17 May alongside another investigation led by Senior Minister Mr Teo Chee Hean on 23 May into the matter (G. Ho, 2023b; Y.H. Goh, 2023c; Y.C. Tham, 2023d).

The reports of both investigations were placed in the public domain via the Prime Minister's Office website, and also put before Parliament and debated on. Both investigations found no preferential treatment had been given to the ministers and their spouses, that there had not been any conflict of interest or disclosure of privileged information, concluding that there had been nothing improper in how the ministers handled the matters.

Record was made of the improvements that the SLA carried out on the properties, described by the Second Law Minister Mr Edwin Tong in Parliament as a standard practice of making the bungalows habitable for an upcoming tenancy. PM Lee expressed his full confidence in both ministers' ability to continue to discharge their duties effectively in government (G. Ho, 2023b; Y.H. Goh, 2023c; Y.C. Tham, 2023d).

While Mr Shanmugam and Dr Balakrishnan were cleared of any wrongdoing, questions surrounding their Ridout Road homes then shifted towards the optics of their living arrangements to Singaporeans, as well as the importance of adhering to both the letter and the spirit of the law.

Opposition MPs raised concerns that the ministers' bungalow homes could create a sense of unfairness and even engender a picture of inequality, and by extension, compromise the ministers' ability to empathise with ordinary Singaporeans. PM Lee responded by saying that ministers are free to live however they please, within their means, and as long as they comply with the law, while Mr Shanmugam retorted that his own personal history, public service and constituents should speak to his ability to empathise with Singaporeans, as opposed to his pay or living arrangements (Kok, 2023a).

The question of the Law Minister seeking the assistance of the Deputy Secretary of the Law Ministry to secure the list of guide rents, also caused unease. Mr Shanmugam explained that he asked the Deputy Secretary so that "there was total transparency" (Elangovan, 2023).

On the question of the spirit of the law, ministers largely agreed that certain actions could have been taken to minimise any potential conflict of interest or hints of preferential treatment. WP's Mr Singh stated that while no one in Parliament was accusing either minister of corruption, in the eyes of many, Mr Shanmugam's decision to ask the Deputy Secretary of a ministry for a list of state properties available for his personal rental was "incongruous" (Kok, 2023a). While investigations found no

preferential treatment given to Mr Shanmugam, the optics of indicating his interest in renting such a property could have implicitly encouraged special treatment towards him, given the office he holds. Fellow MPs suggested that Mr Shanmugam should have engaged his property agent instead. PM Lee responded that outrageous allegations were levelled on the ministers, and after the report had dispelled grave suspicions, the focus was then shifted to Mr Shanmugam asking the Deputy Secretary. “He could have done it a different way, he could have done it this way,” said PM Lee (Kok, 2023a), accepting Mr Shanmugam’s reasoning for approaching the Deputy Secretary for the list of guide rents. It was also stated clearly that Mr Shanmugam had no further direct dealings with the offices in the ministry in completing the process of renting his bungalow (Kok, 2023a).

Notice of Corrections and a Defamation Lawsuit

After the parliamentary debate on the ministers renting Ridout Road bungalows, multiple correction directions were issued under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) over false statements that followed, with Mr Jeyaretnam and three online sites (*Gutzy Asia*, *The Online Citizen Asia*, and *Jom*) receiving such notices. Mr Shanmugam and Dr Balakrishnan also sued Mr Lee Hsien Yang for defamation over comments he had made regarding these rentals (CNA, 2024a; Devaraj, 2023).

Mr Jeyaretnam claimed, after the parliamentary debate and the reports where the facts had been laid out, that the SLA had charged both ministers rents that were below market value. *Gutzy Asia* and *The Online Citizen Asia* republished his claims. Mr Jeyaretnam received a total of five POFMA notices in 2023 (CNA, 2024a; Devaraj, 2023).

In the case of *Jom*, the digital magazine appealed its two POFMA notices, which were subsequently rejected by the High Court. It was issued correction directions over its assertions that Senior Minister Teo did not respond to questions concerning the issue of actual or apparent conflicts of interest and possible breach of the code of conduct for ministers, beyond replying that it is more important to observe the spirit rather than just the letter of the code. *Jom* was also called out for its allegation that the SLA had spent more than S\$1 million on the renovations because the ministers were to be the tenants of the bungalows, with statements by the Ministry of Law and MCI clarifying that the identity of the tenants had no bearing on the amount spent by SLA on the works it had carried out on both properties (Devaraj, 2023).

Mr Lee Hsien Yang did not respond to the defamation suit. The High Court granted default judgment in favour of Mr Shanmugam and Dr Balakrishnan. An injunction was also granted to restrain Mr Lee from further disseminating the false and defamatory allegations which stated, among other things, that the ministers received preferential treatment for the rentals from the SLA. The amount of damages that Mr Lee would pay was to be assessed at a subsequent hearing (Zachariah, 2023a).

Probe into Minister S Iswaran

On 12 July, it was revealed that Transport Minister Mr S Iswaran was assisting with an investigation into a case uncovered by the CPIB. Little was known about the case initially as the anti-graft agency conducted its investigations, but it was yet another reminder of Singapore's zero-tolerance towards corruption and the CPIB's ability to identify and investigate cases of corruption (CNA, 2024b).

It was later disclosed that PM Lee had been informed by the CPIB that it had found reasons to investigate the Minister when it was looking into a separate case. PM Lee provided the approval to CPIB to go forward with the investigation that it sought. PM also asked Mr Iswaran to take a leave of absence until investigations were concluded. Mr Chee Hong Tat was appointed as Acting Minister for Transport on 12 July, and the remainder of Mr Iswaran's portfolio was overseen by other political officeholders. Mr Iswaran was also to remain in Singapore for the entirety of his leave of absence, and would not have access to any state resources or government buildings (CNA, 2024b).

On 14 July, it was announced that property tycoon Mr Ong Beng Seng was cooperating with the CPIB and had surrendered his passport to them. Mr Ong was largely credited as the man responsible for bringing the Formula 1 Grand Prix to Singapore (CNA, 2024a) and it was understood that the matter with Mr Ong was related to that of Minister Iswaran (CNA, 2024b).

On 2 August, PM Lee revealed that Mr Iswaran has been interdicted from duty with a reduced monthly pay of S\$8,500 until further notice, and that such a practice was in line with how the civil service would deal with an officer in a similar situation. The month of August also saw Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam receive a POFMA notice for making a false statement that the CPIB was investigating Mr Iswaran due to foreign pressure (CNA, 2023f, 2024b).

On 8 September, PSP NCMP Ms Hazel Poa filed a motion that Mr Iswaran be suspended as an MP for the remainder of the current session of Parliament, with the goal of preventing him from receiving his MP allowance since he was not performing his duties as an MP. Parliament rejected the motion, voting instead to consider the matter when corruption investigations against Mr Iswaran had concluded (CNA, 2024b).

Investigations into Mr Iswaran were ongoing for the rest of 2023.

Christopher de Souza Cleared of Professional Misconduct Charge

On 31 July, a Court of Three Judges acquitted MP and Deputy Speaker of Parliament Christopher James de Souza of improper professional conduct as a lawyer. Initially, he had been found guilty by a disciplinary tribunal for helping a client to suppress evidence but this was overruled by the Court of Three Judges as it was clear to them that he had no intention of suppressing the breach (L. Lam, 2023c).

Mr de Souza, acting as a partner in his law firm Lee & Lee, was representing Amber Compounding Pharmacy and Amber Laboratories in a High Court suit in November 2018. Amber was initially represented by law firm Dodwell & Co, and was suing a former employee and her company for allegedly stealing trade secrets. Dodwell & Co lawyers were granted search orders to obtain documents from the defendants, but Amber was only allowed to use the documents for the proceedings in the High Court suit. Amber, however, used them to file three reports to the police, the MOM, and the CPIB. All this occurred before Mr de Souza's law firm, Lee & Lee, took over the case (L. Lam, 2023c).

The Court of Three Judges cited the importance of intention as a necessary ingredient of the charge, and saw that the evidence pointed to Mr de Souza and his team consistently urging their client to disclose the breach. He would later discharge himself from the case in July 2019 after realising Amber had, against his advice, used the seized documents (L. Lam, 2023c).

Mr de Souza expressed relief at the verdict of the Court of Three Judges (L. Lam, 2023c).

Affairs within the People's Action Party and the Workers' Party

In July, it was revealed that Speaker of Parliament Mr Tan Chuan-Jin and PAP MP Ms Cheng Li Hui had engaged in an extramarital affair. The developments of a similar nature were also revealed of WP MP Mr Leon Perera and WP member Ms Nicole Seah. Mr Tan and Ms Cheng would resign from PAP, and Mr Perera stood down from being MP and a member of the WP a few days later, dealing blows to both parties' reputations. Questions were raised about the timeline of the affairs, and by extension, the transparency of both parties in addressing them (CNA, 2023g; Mohan, 2023b).

Beginning with the PAP, PM Lee explained the reasoning behind Mr Tan and Ms Cheng's resignations, noting that their inappropriate relationship was discovered in 2020, and despite being told to stop, their affair had continued. Mr Tan was married with two children, while Ms Cheng was single (CNA, 2023g).

PM Lee said he had approached Mr Tan about the ongoing relationship in February 2023 when he discovered that Mr Tan had not terminated it as agreed in 2020 when it was first revealed to him after the 2020 GE (H.M. Ang, 2023d). Mr Tan offered his resignation which PM Lee said he accepted. PM Lee also explained that he wanted to ensure that Mr Tan's constituents would be well taken care of before Mr Tan actually stood down. PM Lee said he reiterated to Mr Tan that the affair had to stop (CNA, 2023g).

However, in the wake of the "hot mic" incident when Mr Tan, as Speaker, was caught using "unparliamentary language" towards WP MP Dr Jamus Lim, PM Lee had also received new information that the affair between Mr Tan and Ms Cheng had continued. He then instructed both of them to resign immediately — in the case of Mr Tan, due to the affair as well as his unparliamentary

conduct. PM Lee said that their resignations were necessary to maintain the high standards of propriety and personal conduct that the PAP stood for over the years (CNA, 2023g).

In the case of Mr Perera and Ms Seah, WP Secretary-General Mr Singh revealed that hints of an extramarital affair between them emerged in late 2020. He said that Mr Perera's driver had approached him about it, but Mr Perera had refuted the claims, stating that he was in an ongoing dispute with his driver and would terminate the latter's services. Mr Perera told Mr Singh that he was considering legal action against his driver over the allegations. The driver would share the same information with other members of the WP, who would question Mr Perera on the issue, only for him to deny it each time it was brought up (Mohan, 2023b; Zachariah, 2023b). Ms Seah was also approached separately on the matter and she too refuted the claims (Mohan, 2023b).

The WP did not pursue the claims owing to a lack of substantive evidence. Mr Singh said there had been no "evidence or corroborating information to support the allegations". Mr Perera's position became untenable after a video of Mr Perera stroking Ms Seah's hand surfaced on the same day as Mr Tan and Ms Cheng's shock announcement. Mr Perera and Ms Seah resigned from the WP and the former, as MP. Mr Singh stated in his response to Mr Perera's letter that his resignation was accepted by its Central Executive Committee as he had contravened a core value of the Party's Constitution which is for members to be "frank and honest in our dealings with the Party and the people of Singapore" (Mohan, 2023b).

Analysis of the parties' handling of their affairs

The main criticism towards the PAP and WP were related to the gaps in their respective timelines. Both parties had members who knew about the affairs for some time, but had not taken swift and decisive action. Analysts pointed out that the seeming inaction by both parties on the affairs up until they were made public led to questions about the transparency and integrity of both parties and their leaders, and how much the parties should police their members (H.M. Ang & D. Tham, 2023; Zachariah, 2023b).

In the case of the PAP, PM Lee gave both Mr Tan and Ms Cheng the benefit of the doubt only to have to compel them to resign once new information came to light. Political analysts recognised that the length of time PM Lee had known about the affair, and the time between the acceptance of Mr Tan's resignation in February and the date he took decisive action on the matter, raised questions about party discipline and its enforcement (H.M. Ang & D. Tham, 2023).

A similar criticism was levelled against the WP. Analysts acknowledged that the WP seemingly tolerated Mr Perera and Ms Seah's affair, brushing aside the driver's concerns and refusing to investigate further, relying on their members' words that they were not in a relationship. There was

the question of whether the WP could have probed further rather than how it brushed the claims aside (Zachariah, 2023b).

No by-election

As a result of the troubles in both the PAP and WP camps, there were a total of five empty seats in Parliament by the end of 2023 (Y.H. Goh, 2023d).

In addition, the resignation of WP MP Raeesah Khan in 2021 and Senior Minister Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam stepping down from his post to run for the presidency in July 2023, the Parliament saw a record number of empty seats (Y.H. Goh, 2023d).

While experts argued that there would be no practical ramifications on Parliament's work, the notion of a by-election to fill these seats began to surface amongst public discourse (Y.H. Goh, 2023d).

Under the Constitution, there is no requirement for a by-election to be called despite the empty seats. It would be called at the prime minister's discretion, who would consider the amount of time left in the term of Parliament. The only requirement of the Constitution is that gaps have to be filled by an election — referring to "how" rather than "when" or "why" it must be done (Y.H. Goh, 2023d).

Parliamentary Conduct Incidents

There was a series of incidents involving the conduct of members of Parliament in 2023. Parliamentarians are expected to conduct themselves with decorum and abide by its other codes of conduct including how they uphold parliamentary privilege.

Pritam Singh and Faisal Manap

Continuing into 2023 was the police investigation into how WP MPs Mr Pritam Singh and Mr Faisal Manap's conduct relating to the lie that WP MP Raeesah Khan had told in Parliament in 2021 (Kok, 2023b).

In 2021, it was determined after investigations that Ms Khan had lied about the police mishandling a sexual assault case. She admitted to the lie and resigned from her position as MP (Baharudin, 2021).

In 2022, a Committee of Privileges recommended Ms Khan be fined S\$35,000 for the lies she told in Parliament, and found that Mr Singh, Mr Faisal, and WP Chairman Ms Sylvia Lim had guided Ms Khan to maintain her deceptive narrative, even after she confessed to them that she had lied to the House. The Committee later determined that Mr Singh was untruthful in giving evidence under oath, which could amount to perjury. It also recommended that Mr Faisal be investigated over his refusal to answer relevant questions and to consider if criminal proceedings ought to be instituted. Parliament then voted that the two men be referred to the public prosecutor, who then referred the case to the police for further investigations (Ong, 2022b; Kok, 2023b) .

Home Affairs and Law Minister Mr Shanmugam revealed in response to a question in Parliament that the investigations into Mr Singh and Mr Faisal were ongoing (Kok, 2023b).

Leong Mun Wai

A line of questioning on why Mr Lee Hsien Yang and his wife Mrs Lee Suet Fern were identified in relation to a police investigation (see section on this incident) led PSP NCMP Mr Leong Mun Wai to get into a heated exchange with Mr Shanmugam. This would prompt a series of incendiary social media posts by Mr Leong, for which Mr Shanmugam believed that Mr Leong had breached parliamentary procedures (A. Ng, 2023).

Comparing the results of the investigation into the six former Keppel O&M employees who had remained anonymous, Mr Leong questioned Mr Shanmugam on why the Lees were identified. Unsatisfied with Mr Shanmugam's response, Mr Leong then took to social media where he claimed that the ministers involved in the investigations were attempting to shape public opinion on criminal proceedings (A. Ng, 2023).

Mr Shanmugam argued in Parliament that Mr Leong had breached parliamentary procedures through his posts; that is, for making statements outside of Parliament that could be deemed to have defamed a member or the proceedings/character of Parliament (A. Ng, 2023).

When questioned on the matter, a request for clarification from then Speaker of Parliament Mr Tan Chuan-Jin prompted Mr Leong to retort: "Speaker, if the minister didn't ask me, I suggest you do not ask" (A. Ng, 2023). This received a rebuke from Mr Tan, and Mr Leong apologised and withdrew his statements on social media. Leader of the House, Ms Indranee Rajah noted on 18 April that no further action was needed regarding Mr Leong's decorum, and reiterated the importance of adhering to the code of conduct and not make unsubstantiated allegations in any capacity (A. Ng, 2023).

Tan Chuan-Jin

On the 11 July, netizens discovered that Mr Tan had muttered the words "f***** populist" at WP MP Dr Jamus Lim following the latter's speech. Dr Lim had spoken on 17 April during the debate on the President's Address and expressed support for President Halimah Yacob's call to improve Singapore's social compact. Within this context, Dr Lim remarked that it was frustrating that the city-state had yet to establish an official poverty line (CNA, 2023h).

Based on parliamentary recordings, Mr Tan had muttered the expletive as the speech ended. He would later apologise to Dr Lim for the "unparliamentary language", with Dr Lim confirming his acceptance of the apology on social media (CNA, 2023h).

Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Suet Fern Absconding From Singapore

Having come under investigation by the police, Mr Lee Hsien Yang and his wife Mrs Lee Suet Fern were found to have absconded from Singapore. Their departure was announced by Mr Shanmugam

in Parliament, and was done so in the interest of the public, explained the minister (Y.C. Tham, 2023e).

The couple were found by a disciplinary tribunal and the Court of Three Judges in 2020 to have lied under oath during disciplinary proceedings against Mrs Lee over her handling of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's last will. This was in relation to the conflict of the Lee family in relation to the late Mr Lee's Oxley Road home (Y.C. Tham, 2023e).

PSP NCMP Mr Leong Mun Wai asked why the Lees had been identified in the case when other individuals being similarly investigated by the authorities such as the six former Keppel O&M employees over their bribery case, did not have their identities disclosed to the public (Y.C. Tham, 2023e).

Law Minister Mr Shanmugam said the decision to reveal the identifies of those is evaluated on a case-by-case basis. In the case of the Lees, Mr Shanmugam explained that their predicament was of significant public interest, and the people and the facts of the offences under probe were already well-known. The fact that they had absconded from Singapore also prompted the authorities to make their names public. The minister maintained that Mr and Mrs Lee would have every right to explain themselves if they were to cooperate with the police (Y.C. Tham, 2023e).

Proroguing of Parliament

On 24 March, Parliament took a mid-term break, reconvening on 10 April with President Halimah Yacob's last address as President, and marking the 13th time in the nation's history that its Parliament prorogued since Singapore's independence (Chew, 2023d).

President's address

Madam Halimah's Presidential Address focused on four key objectives of the government. Beginning with the goal of creating a broader and more open meritocracy, President Halimah acknowledged the innate desire of those who do well in life to pass on their advantages to their children, and the need to combat this tendency as it would weaken and fracture society over time. Another objective is to broaden the definitions of success. She stated that it was important to reward people for work that is valuable to society fairly – such as caregiving, as it is currently not recognised as integral to social stability. Rectifying this would be crucial to creating a more equitable society (Chew, 2023e).

President Halimah emphasised the need to strengthen social safety nets to cope with the growing uncertainty of the 21st century, highlighting ongoing efforts by the government to reskill its citizens amidst faster technological upheaval, what it was doing to address the needs of seniors, and dealing with higher cost of living (Chew, 2023e).

She then discussed the need for Singapore to become a smart but liveable city, ensuring that its urban landscape will continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of Singaporeans (Chew, 2023e).

President Halimah highlighted the importance of refreshing Singapore's social compact and spoke of the collective responsibility of all Singaporeans in achieving this. It would take a network of stakeholders — socially responsible and sustainable businesses, as well as an active citizenry — to do so. She was hopeful that the 4G leadership would fulfil these (Chew, 2023e).

Populism and political opportunism

After five days of debating the President's Address, Leader of the Opposition Mr Pritam Singh and DPM Mr Lawrence Wong clashed regarding the issues of populism and political opportunism in Singapore's political landscape.

DPM Wong had called on the opposition to offer serious alternative policy suggestions to matters raised in the debate and not opportunistic or populist ideas that erode trust in government. Saying that it had been an unfair criticism levelled against him and his party, Mr Singh stated: "If all we were doing was putting forward populist, unrealistic policies, we will not see the government actively considering some variation of the Workers' Party manifesto ideas on anti-discrimination legislation, minimum wage and redundancy insurance" (Iau, 2023e).

While both agreed that populism was to be resisted by state and society, and that each would expect the other to call out populism if it was evident, they disagreed on the notion that the WP was guilty of political opportunism. Mr Singh said that a key constraint to the opposition forming alternative ideas was its access to relevant information, which could not be addressed by filing questions in Parliament. He also said that greater openness with information would be critical to the success of the 4G leaders' efforts in refreshing the social compact (Iau, 2023e).

He stated that while WP is a small party, its medium-term goal is to see that one-third of the seats in the House was not in PAP's hands. This, he explained, is not to block the ability of the governing party to institute constitutional changes but to allow proposals to be properly assessed before they are voted on. Mr Singh said that while his party was not seeking to bring a political revolution, it did not want to see the PAP rest on its laurels (Iau, 2023e).

New Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs)

The end of Parliament's mid-term break and its restart also saw the arrival of eight new NMPs, and incumbent lawyer Mr Raj Joshua Thomas returning for a second two-and-a-half-year term (CNA, 2023i).

Representing a wide range of expertise from the arts sector, food and beverage sector, banking and finance, the legal profession, and various academic fields, these individuals were found to have notable achievements in their respective domains, and a strong understanding of the issues they are passionate about by a committee of MPs. They took their oaths on 24 July (CNA, 2023i).

Introduced in 1990, the NMP scheme was created to ensure a wide representation of views in Parliament. Up to nine NMPs can be appointed in each parliament, with submissions of names welcomed from the public, businesses and social service organisations (CNA, 2023i).

Presidential Election 2023

Beginning with Madam Halimah Yacob announcing her decision not to run for re-election on 29 May, the election process for Singapore's ninth president concluded with the election of former Deputy Prime Minister and Senior Minister Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam on 1 September and his inauguration on 14 September (Cheong, 2023; Y.H. Goh, 2023e).

Singapore's ninth presidential election saw a number of presidential hopefuls submit their application forms to the Elections Department: Mr Shanmugaratnam; Harvey Norman Ossia chairman Mr George Goh; former chief investment officer of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) Mr Ng Kok Song; and former NTUC Income Chairman Mr Tan Kin Lian (Y.H. Goh, 2023f).

Eventually, the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) certified all but Mr Goh as eligible to contest for the role. Explaining their decisions for each of the shortlisted candidates, the Elections Department (ELD) were satisfied that the three eligible candidates were men of integrity, good character and reputation based on the information provided to the PEC. Both Mr Tharman and Mr Ng were found to have sufficient and relevant experience through their public service with the latter based on his application through the deliberative track, and Mr Tan was deemed eligible through his private sector experience and application through the deliberative track (Y.H. Goh, 2023f; Zachariah, 2023c).

Mr Goh was found to be ineligible, as the PEC noted that his experience in managing five companies was not equivalent to that of the top executive officer of a single company with a shareholder equity of S\$500 million — a core component of the eligibility criteria. Mr Goh expressed his frustration at the outcome, alleging that the committee had not disclosed their reasoning for denying him the certificate of eligibility to contest. The PEC responded by releasing the letter it sent to him to the public, which included the rationale behind their decision (Zachariah, 2023c).

While all three candidates promised to serve as a president for the public good, each campaigned differently. Mr Tharman promised to promote a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect amongst fellow Singaporeans, and acknowledged the diversity of views in society. Given his background as former finance minister, he understood the workings of the national system of reserves which the President protects. He was also vaunted for his "independence of mind" even though he had been in government since 2011 (C. Goh, 2023).

While both Mr Ng and Mr Tan campaigned on their competence in financial management and the promise of being independent candidates with no political affiliations, Mr Tan made clear his intention to influence government policy where he deemed fit — to provide guidance on the investment strategies of the reserves during his presidential candidate broadcast speech and direct the government to ease the cost of living pressures of Singaporeans — both of which the President has

no authority to achieve. Mr Tan was issued corrections by the IMDA and the ELD (Fang & Y.C. Tham, 2023; lau, 2023f; D. Tham, 2023c).

Mr Tharman secured 70.4 per cent of the votes. He interpreted his landslide victory as a strong endorsement from Singaporeans of his abilities to lead, and promised to fulfil his campaign promises. As the first non-Chinese presidential candidate to win a contested election, Mr Tharman said that while race was a factor in the polls, ultimately, it was not the prevailing one. His win, he felt, marked a positive turn in race relations in multiracial Singapore which happened at every decade, and therefore, the health of its democratic institutions (Cheong, 2023).

PAP Convention 2023

A biennial affair, the PAP Convention in 2023 was especially significant, marking the start of the transition of leadership from PM Lee to DPM Wong. The convention was also held in the wake of a series of developments in the PAP as described in the foregoing sections (L. Tang, 2023d).

PM Lee's speech

Secretary-General of the PAP, PM Lee announced that he would hand over premiership to DPM Wong by the time the party marked its 70th anniversary in November 2024 “if all goes well” (L. Tang, 2023d). DPM Wong also announced to the party faithful that he was ready for his next mission.

PM Lee recognised the spate of controversies that involved the party's members and assured them that the leaders and the party remained unwavering in its commitment to honesty and incorruptibility, maintaining that these standards were non-negotiable (Kok, 2023c).

Although it was not an incident that involved PAP members, PM Lee also referred to the S\$2.8 billion-dollar money laundering case that had been uncovered in the year as well as a question that a journalist had asked about whether the strategy of inviting high net-worth individuals to set up family offices in Singapore was indicative that the country was prepared to let standards slip to attract “unclean money”. PM Lee wholly denied this and maintained that Singapore would continue to remain vigilant towards corruption (Kok, 2023c).

In his speech, PM Lee stated that having more opposition voices in Parliament did not equate to better governance. While he recognised the need for some degree of diverse views and opinions, he noted that much more time in Parliament was spent debating issues. He lamented that this was not necessarily due to opposition politicians having constructive views on policymaking as their true intentions were often to score political points for their own agendas. While he recognised that this was more or less how democracies are meant to function, there was a the risk of dividing societies along political lines (L. Tang, 2023d). He warned voters that the political dynamic will change if a significant fraction of Singaporeans wanted the PAP to be checked by the opposition and voted more of those politicians into Parliament (L. Tang, 2023d).

DPM Wong's speech

In his speech, DPM Wong remarked that as the oppositions policies were often “shades of the PAP’s policies”, the need to effectively explain its own positions and show the public how they differ would be crucial in securing votes for future GEs. He maintained that he would always operate under the assumption that the PAP’s victory in an election was not to be taken for granted, and that his leadership style would prompt him to listen to a diverse range of perspectives and staying open to new ideas (H.M. Ang, 2023e). He said that the PAP had to broaden its outreach to increase the diversity of people who become members and to do so on different platforms. He said he would work hard to build a consensus and continue to find commonalities amongst Singaporeans. DPM Wong emphasised that this was how the government had dealt with challenging issues in society, like the removal of the ban on donning the *tudung* in the healthcare sector and the repeal of Section 377A (Iau, 2023g).

New faces in the PAP

The Party introduced three members as speakers at its Convention who appealed to fellow members to embrace diversity and to be more inclusive so that differences in experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds among the people do not splinter society.

It is expected that such new faces will feature as GE candidates. They were consultant orthopaedic surgeon Dr Hamid Razak, entrepreneur Ms Chua Wei-Shan, and university lecturer Dr Elmie Nekmat. (Zalizan, 2023c).

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