

Has the PAP lived up to its promises? Academics look back at its 2015 manifesto

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The People Action Party's 2015 General Election manifesto brimmed with promises. With its slogan "With You, For You, For Singapore," the party garnered 69.9% votes and 80 seats in Parliament. Five years on, and with a GE around the corner, here is a check on its promises with the help of some experts.

Education

"Learning for Life, Throughout Life". The promise this carried was that every child would have a strong pre-school start. Addressing the need to provide equal opportunities, which also means to allow for a level playing field, the government's aim was to raise the quality of pre-schooling and make it more accessible to disadvantaged and lower-income families. For example, around 30 % of places at the Education Ministry-run kindergartens were set aside for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Dr Chua Beng Huat, a professor in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the National University of Singapore, said, "Making pre-school education available to the poor is fundamental, a sine qua non of policies on poverty." Education uplift for children is the first step to "uplifting out of poverty," he stressed. An example of how the government has done this is through the KidSTART programme led by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) to enable children from low-income families to have a better start in life. According to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2019, the plan was to benefit another 5,000 disadvantaged children up to age six in the next three years.

Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said, "This system seems to innovate on pedagogy, and deliver best practice to uplift kids from disadvantaged families through pre-school education — with the playing field tilted towards them in terms of good, almost enriched education."

Dr Tan Ern Ser, Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, argued that the government has been successful in "giving a leg-up to children from low-income families in the form of access to quality of pre-school education and helping them to succeed in their education journey ahead."

Creating jobs

In the PAP's 2015 manifesto, the party pledged to help Singaporeans acquire skills and progress in their careers, and to invest in every citizen, seen as a key to providing good jobs.

According to Dr Koh, the ruling party has made good on its promise, as there are now "better opportunities for young adults from disadvantaged families get good jobs through quality internships". One such scheme that has pushed for quality internships is SkillsFuture. One of the aims of this scheme is to improve the internships available in Institutes of Higher Learning. Additionally, the SkillsFuture Earn and Learn Programme aims to give fresh polytechnic and ITE graduates a head start in their careers by being placed in jobs and

receive a salary while undergoing structured on-the job training that leads to an industry-recognised qualification.

The employers and trainees in this programme receive substantial support from the government. Other than investing an average of more than \$1 billion per year from 2015 to 2020 in SkillsFuture, the government claims that between 2015 and 2018, almost 60,000 jobs were created, out of which about 50,000 went to Singaporeans and more than 9,000 to Permanent Residents (PRs).

Another promise in the manifesto was that the government would keep Singapore as the best place in the world to do business. The government has aimed to make it enticing for foreign companies to do business in Singapore by maintaining and expanding its network of Double Tax Agreements (DTAs). As of now, Singapore has more than 80 DTAs with other countries to ensure that trade and investments are not taxed twice.

Regardless of the success in creating jobs for people thus far, the Covid-19 outbreak calls for re-doubled efforts in ensuring that jobs are available so that people continue earning money.

Dr Koh mentioned that in the upcoming elections, what people would ask is “how much money can I earn?”, “what determines that?” and “is there a level playing field in which case what effort I put in is rewarded in the same way, regardless of my background, race, language or religion”.

Dr Bridget Welsh, Honorary Research Associate at the Asia Research Institute in the University of Nottingham- Malaysia, agreed that the PAP was spending “more on addressing livelihood issues during the pandemic”. She explained that, therefore, despite the perceived success or failure of the government, the importance in the upcoming elections would lie in “how they frame the promises”.

Inequality and poverty

According to global wealth estimates by Credit Suisse, 73% of Singapore’s wealth is owned by the top 20% of income- earning households. To combat this, the PAP’s commitment has been to ensuring opportunities for all, infused with pride and recognition in every job. A slogan it coined: “Opportunities for all, regardless of starting point”.

To deal with socio-economic inequality, the government has embarked on several measures designed to help people from different age brackets. For example, the PAP has invested heavily in the education of every child regardless of a kid’s background. Any child attending primary and secondary school in Singapore receives close to \$11,000 in educational subsidies every year. For workers, emphasis is placed on skills upgrading and continual improvement with the government introducing the Skillsfuture movement so that every worker gets the chance to experience lifelong learning.

For senior citizens, the government came out with the Silver Support Scheme, aimed at supporting those with insufficient funds and lack family support.

When we reached out to academics for their insights on Singapore’s socio-economic situation, the following is what they had to say.

Dr Koh commended the PAP for taking the appropriate measures required to solve social

inequality through the “FirstStart Programme [and] the UPLIFT programme, all targeted at early intervention for disadvantaged families to ensure that parents have good jobs, and children have a good start in life, from housing to nutrition to preschool and so on”. In addition, narrowing in on Singapore’s wealth inequality problem, she mentioned how “wealth is also based on who one networks with” and that “greater attention is now given to enabling people from different social circles to mix”.

Dr Tan highlighted how the incumbents had in fact delivered on their promises “in terms of preparing and equipping Singaporeans and businesses to respond to digital disruptions [and] enhancing retirement financial adequacy of seniors”.

To conclude, Dr Chua asserted, “Public discussion on income inequality emerged after the publication of Prof Teo You Yenn’s book. This is what inequality looks like. So, it should be an issue for this coming election. I would be hugely disappointed if the non-PAP parties do not raise the poverty issue. “

External challenges

Stated in the PAP Manifesto, and perhaps a well-known fact about Singapore, external challenges, and developments around the world, have a direct impact on both the Republic’s relations and economy. As part of the PAP’s Singapore Economy plan, the party has been stressing it would ensure that Singapore would be the best place in the region to do business and be a “global capital” for ideas and innovation.

One major external challenge that arose in the past year or so is the growing US-China rivalry and the impact on Singapore. As mentioned by Dr Koh, “The past year and a half with the start of the US-China trade tensions has been challenging again, not just to Singapore but many trading and manufacturing nations like us”.

In response to this rivalry, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in 2019, “There are two major implications for Singapore. First, on the external front, in our relations with the US and China. And second, on the domestic front, the impact on our economy”.

He explained that both countries are vital for Singapore’s economy. The US is both Singapore’s “major security partner” and the most “important economic partner”. The country has been crucial in ensuring Singapore’s sovereignty and also in job-creation for locals.

On the other hand, China and Singapore have had extensive economic cooperation, such as with the “All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times”, and is also Singapore’s largest export market.

Prime Minister Lee explained that with China it is easy for other countries to misunderstand Singapore and automatically assume that the nation would take sides with China in this rivalry because of Singapore’s demographic makeup. Additionally, if Singapore took sides with the US, China may also “misunderstand our motivations”.

Ultimately, the state has insisted on developing relations with both sides, rather than choose sides to prevent any political and economic fall-out for the nation. Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan stated, “We must find ways to deepen and enhance our cooperation with both China and the US, including in new areas of mutual interest, and encourage all parties to act in accordance with international law.”

One external challenge that may be seen by locals as a failure of the state in delivering its promises would undoubtedly be the Covid-19 pandemic. This global horror has had repercussions in almost all aspects of society and life. The economy, for instance, has taken a major hit. The economic recovery of Singapore is highly dependent on the rest of the world, given its open economy.

With the worst global recession in sight due to the pandemic, Singapore is also expected to experience its worst recession since independence. While the government has tried to bolster the economy through stimulus packages and protection of job losses, some Singaporeans have felt that the amount given at the individual level is insufficient. However, as concluded by Dr Chua, "How Singaporeans have accepted/rejected the government's management of Covid-19 remains an open question. The jury is still out, so to speak. Whatever the ministers' rhetoric."

(The full Q and A below)

Answers are from academics Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) of the Institute of Policy Studies, Dr Tan Ern Ser, Associate Professor of Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, Dr Bridget B. Welsh, Honorary Research Associate at the University of Nottingham-Malaysia, Dr Chua Beng Huat, Sociology Professor at NUS.

Q: What do you think were some of the challenges the PAP faced in the last few years?

Dr Gillian Koh: "The key challenge that really stuck in my mind is not one that is unique to Singapore but may have resulted from unique conditions or circumstances and that is of social inequality.

"I think that the PAP government has invested heavily in the past four years to address this.

It has the FirstStart Programme, the UPLIFT programme, all targeted at early intervention for disadvantaged families to ensure that parents have good jobs, and children have a good start in life, from housing to nutrition to pre-school and so on.

"Another very important and related piece in that puzzle is the development of the MOE kindergartens as a system. This is a system that seems to innovate on pedagogy and deliver best practice to uplift kids from disadvantaged families through pre-school education." In other words, the playing field is tilted towards them in terms of good, almost enriched education. This is why up to one-third of the spaces in these schools and their location are geared towards such families and the neighbourhoods they are found in.

"The global economy which Singapore is necessarily plugged into is a very polarizing one. We mediate this through education, but with our emphasis on merit, which is necessary, there is the question of whether kids from the less-well-off families get a fair shot at that competition based on merit. Hence, the redistribution and extra support help us beat the odds as a society.

"Finally, we recognize that wealth is also based on who one networks with – networks provide connections, knowledge and opportunities. These are not about corruption but just the social exchange of information and intelligence. So, greater attention is now given to enabling people from different social circles to mix.

“This helps with the first set of issues, that is, to mitigate social inequality. Hence, the efforts at the grassroots level to see how to facilitate interaction between those who live in public and private housing, be it through sports, recreational activities, religious activities, even social service delivery and volunteerism on an on-going basis – these are helpful too.

“The government’s Singapore Together movement is very much in sync with that spirit and aspiration. If you wish, refer to the inaugural speech by the President at the re-opening of Parliament and all the ministerial speeches delivered in response to that. You will see that the government set out this agenda.”

Dr Tan Ern Ser:

“I’d say the external challenges were mainly about the digital disruptions, global competition, and the ongoing US-China trade war. Domestically, there were the perennial challenges of the rapidly ageing population and related issues of CPF minimum-sum scheme, retirement adequacy, and the decaying lease of ‘sold’ HDB flats.

“There were also the issue of unequal social mobility chances and thereby the need to equalize opportunities to reduce the impact of class origin on class destiny.”

Dr Bridget B Welsh:

“The main challenge is the economy — slower growth, an unwillingness to embrace a new model of growth, a less favourable regional and global context have all combined to make for a difficult problem for the PAP that relies on economic legitimacy.

“Beyond this, there has been the testing/competition/ assessment of the 4G leaders, the Covid-19 pandemic, navigating the US-China Great Power rivalry, concerns about restrictions on freedom of speech and increased concerns about social justice within Singapore along class and racial lines.”

Dr Chua Beng Huat:

“After 2011 GE, the PAP government worked pretty hard to regain their ground and the 2015 GE results would have suggested to any reasonable Singaporean, whatever his/her ideological persuasion, that it had indeed recovered more than it had lost in 2011, thus terminated the over-exuberant excited claim that a ‘new normal’ would unfold after 2011. From 2015 till the pandemic, I would say that the government had had a pretty smooth sailing four years.

“Yes, there were side shows but no challenging issues.”

Q: Do you think the incumbents have delivered on their promises made in the 2015 General Election? If they were unable to, what are some reasons for this?

Dr Gillian Koh:

“The past year and a half with the start of the US-China trade tensions has been challenging again, not just to Singapore but many trading and manufacturing nations like us. ... To address inequality, more effort has been made to provide better opportunities for young adults from disadvantaged families get good jobs through quality internships through several government schemes.

"This is really investing in a more inclusive society and will take time to bear fruit but we can see that there are definitive efforts made in this direction."

Dr Tan Ern Ser:

"I would argue that they have delivered on their promises—though with different degree of success—in terms of preparing and equipping Singaporeans and businesses to respond to digital disruptions; enhancing retirement financial adequacy of seniors; and giving a leg-up to children from low-income families in the form of access to quality preschool education and helping them to succeed in the education journey ahead."

Dr Bridget B Welsh:

"Incumbents rarely deliver on their promises. Voters generally assess performance at the time, and appeal to long-standing lens of how they see the incumbent party. The PAP has spent more on addressing livelihood issues during the pandemic and continues to be proactive in engaging public health. The key will be how they frame the promises in this election."

Dr Chua Beng Huat:

"Looking through the list of items of promises in PM Lee's introduction to the manifesto, there were two obvious items that needed continuing fixing: mass transport, particularly the MRT, and speeding up public housing supply; these had gone on smoothly.

"The big surprise for me was the actual expansion of pre-school for children of the poor.

Making pre-school education available to the poor is fundamental, a sine qua non of policies on poverty. It will not be a silver bullet because education uplift for a large group of children takes decades, but without it, there will be no uplifting out of poverty to talk about."

Q: What are some main issues do you think the public would be concerned with for the coming elections?

Dr Gillian Koh:

"Livelihoods – whether people can survive the hardship of the current Covid crisis but also the longer-term structural issues of industrial change, technological change, the changes in the nature of work and job contracts and so on. How can one plan one's life around buying a home, having a family without certainty that there is work and income?"

"And then, the question is, what qualifies you for work, and are the goal posts shifting goal posts?"

"We don't need government for much else but arguably, this is the hardest thing to do. It is easy for politicians to say 'spend the reserves'; 'no need to pay maintenance fees if you cannot afford it' but what people are more interested in is how much money can I earn, what determines that, is there a level playing field in which case what effort I put in is rewarded in the same way, regardless of my background, race, language or religion."

Dr Tan Ern Ser:

"Obviously, the elephant in the room is the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on lives and livelihoods. The main issues are the need to restart the economy, prevent job loss, and

creating new ones to ensure that no one is 'left behind' and no age cohort is 'lost', and thereby unable to ever fully recover from the devastating impact of Covid-19 on the economy."

Dr Bridget B Welsh:

" Economy (Livelihoods and Income), and Covid- 19.'

Dr Chua Beng Huat:

"The perennial issue of low wages for the elderly cleaners and security guards has now emerged front-row and centre in public concerns. The question, 'Are Singaporeans willing to pay more?' for these services can no longer be asked rhetorically, with the presumption that the answer will obviously be. I believe this time round, some quantitatively significant increase their non- living wage would have to be promised.

"Along with this will of course be the question of low wage foreign workers. And, the lives of the bottom 20% of our own citizens, from those who receive WIS to the abject poor in rental public housing, including aged and single-parent, large households. So, it should be an issue for this coming election. I would be hugely disappointed if the non-PAP parties do not raise the poverty issue."

Q: Do you have any other thoughts or comments you would like to share with us with regard to the elections?

Dr Tan Ern Ser:

"I believe the election is about the survival of a small nation in a treacherous world, and beyond that whether current and future generations can still live the Singapore Dream."

Dr Bridget B Welsh:

"Despite grouses, the PAP goes into the election with clear advantages — management of the pandemic and a changed election campaign climate that favours the incumbent.

"This said, the election as Lee Hsien Loong's perceived last one, and the aim is to go out on a high. This election is also one in which they are ratcheting up controls and defensiveness that alienate middle ground voters. The key challenges for Singapore will happen after the election — strengthening the economy and changing to the helm of the 4G leadership."

Dr Chua Beng Huat:

"How Singaporeans have accepted/rejected the government's management of Covid-19 remains an open question. The jury is still out, so to speak. In spite of the ministers' repetitive rhetoric that Singaporeans have shown themselves to be responsible, rules abiding and 'pulled together' to pull the