

The Big Read: What went wrong for the People's Action Party, in the eyes of party insiders

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TODAY

SINGAPORE — As the sample counts for General Election 2020 were announced on the night of July 10 and a national slide against the People's Action Party (PAP) became evident, the ruling party's branch in Teck Ghee — where its secretary-general, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, had contested and won since 1984 — was a scene of sombre despondency.

With supporters kept home due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was also none of the fist-pumping and flag-waving celebrations of 2015, when PAP secured 69.9 per cent of the popular vote.

Instead, the media stationed outside the branch office could see — through the windows — about a dozen white-clad party activists and PM Lee's wife Ho Ching silently glued to a small television screen watching the results, though their face masks hid their expressions.

PM Lee and the rest of his Ang Mo Kio Group Representation Constituency (GRC) teammates were in a separate room, which was out of the media's sight.

As the candidates and activists waited for the final results, the smell of durians bought from a nearby fruit seller wafted out from the branch. One activist offered them to the media waiting outside, saying that there was plenty of the thorny fruit still unopened inside.

With PAP ultimately garnering 61.2 per cent of the national vote — which was 1.1 percentage points ahead of its poorest performance in GE2011 — several party activists across the country expressed their frustration over their party's poor results.

The result missed the 65 per cent mark that the party was aiming for, party insiders told TODAY. It was also hoping not to lose more parliamentary seats to the opposition — but it did, after its main political rival, the Workers' Party (WP), won the newly formed four-member Sengkang GRC.

In the wee hours of the morning following Polling Day, a panel of PAP bigwigs, including PM Lee and PM-designate Heng Swee Keat, addressed the media, with PM Lee saying that the party had received a "clear mandate" even though it was not as strong a mandate as he had hoped.

The results showed "a clear desire for a diversity of voices in Parliament", particularly among younger voters, and also reflected the pain and uncertainty felt by Singaporeans, including income loss, jobs-related anxieties, and the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, said Mr Lee.

Other PAP leaders, including party treasurer K Shanmugam and central executive committee member Tan Chuan-Jin, also weighed in over the past week on the work that needs to be done to win back voters.

While PAP's performance fell short of the party's expectations, the party insiders noted that its overall vote share was in line with its electoral showings in the past three to four decades.

Since the 1984 GE, PAP has garnered around 60 to 66 per cent of the popular vote, with the exception of GE2001 (75.3 per cent) and GE2015 (69.9 per cent). The two outliers saw exceptionally strong performances by PAP, owing to voters' flight to safety post-9/11 in the 2001 polls and the "Lee Kuan Yew effect" in the 2015 elections.

Still, the party insiders felt that PAP could have done better in this GE, if not for a host of factors behind the scenes that contributed to the below-par showing.

While party discipline meant that they would typically keep their views within the party, the 11 PAP members whom TODAY interviewed — ranging from rank-and-file branch activists to retired Members of Parliament (MPs) and former political office-holders — shared their frank opinions, on condition of anonymity, on what they thought had gone wrong during the campaign.

One activist, who is in her mid-30s and has been involved with the party for over a decade, said: "The problem with my dear PAP is that many activists have given feedback over the years, but there is still a large inertia about changing its tactics, about embracing social media, and accepting that there are things within the party that need to be relooked."

Another 25-year-old activist, who has been with PAP for eight years, said: "The old guard of the party refuse to listen to the youth. They love tried-and-tested plans, and they are technocrats scared of taking risks... It may take a generational change before they change their ways."

Some said that despite efforts on the ground to forge a positive agenda, the election campaign had veered off PAP's message of jobs and livelihoods, which meant that the party somewhat failed to convince middle-aged professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) worried about the poor economy.

Others noted how the opposition's unified call for diverse voices was hard to counter, including WP's oft-repeated "no blank cheque" mantra.

Several also took aim at a campaign strategy that backfired, including the decision to field new candidates and move political office-holders to new areas just days before campaigning started, which gave candidates little time to reach out to voters and gain recognition.

With the ruling party licking its wounds after GE2020, TODAY looks back at the landmark election through the eyes of the activists and senior party members, who gave insiders' accounts of how certain narratives played out during the election and picked out what worked well for PAP, and what was left wanting.

OPPOSITION WAYLAID PAP'S AGENDA

There were two predominant narratives unfolding in the course of the campaign — PAP's message about jobs and livelihoods versus the opposition's call for diverse voices in government.

A survey of more than 1,500 voters by Blackbox Research on these two narratives in GE2020 found that the opposition's arguments had cut through PAP's messaging, with 47 per cent of respondents agreeing with the opposition rather than with PAP. A slight majority (53 per cent) agreed more with PAP's economy-driven message.

The research firm conducted two surveys during the campaign before Polling Day on July 10, though it did not publish the survey results until after the GE in accordance with election rules.

Insiders said that the PAP leadership was keenly aware of where voters' attention were turning to after Nomination Day, such as on the debate over the Non-Constituency MP scheme and the threat of an opposition wipeout.

On July 4, the midway point in the hustings, PAP's second assistant secretary-general Chan Chun Sing urged opposition parties to refocus on tackling the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic fallout at a press conference.

Activists noted that despite Mr Chan's call, it was not until later — through PM Lee's online lunchtime rally on July 6 and Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's online speech on July 7 — that the conversation shifted back to which party was best placed to meet the challenges in jobs and livelihoods.

These late efforts could have helped solidify the 60 per cent base that believes in PAP's long track record of stewarding Singapore, one activist said, noting that online and offline comments about these web sessions had been helpful to PAP.

By then, however, online attention had also shifted towards WP's Raeesah Khan, who was then a Sengkang GRC candidate. The police issued a statement on July 5 that the 26-year-old was under investigation for her past social media posts that allegedly promoted enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race.

The party's July 6 statement calling for WP to take a stand on Ms Raeesah's posts had made bigger waves online than the two key e-rallies by PM Lee and Mr Tharman, activists said.

In Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC, one activist said that his team had been focused on its core messaging on what PAP was doing to help Singapore emerge stronger from the pandemic, rather than on rebutting the rival Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) that was contesting in his area.

"We had much to let voters in the area know about our positive agenda, such that we had no bandwidth to think about rebuttals or what the SDP was doing," he said.

But it was also difficult for PAP to avoid refuting the opposition's claims that it saw were false, he added. He noted how the GRC's anchor candidate Lawrence Wong had, on July 5, held a press conference to address SDP chairman Paul Tambyah's claims about the Government's handling of Covid-19.

The activist believed that Mr Wong handled these rebuttals well without "overcooking" them. However, he added that in hindsight, the party's other rebuttals to SDP — such as its false claim over Singapore's "10 million population target" — may have backfired and distracted voters from PAP's central message.

The activist said: "As the incumbent, PAP is held to a different standard than the opposition because if we call them out, we are the bullies, but if we are called out, the opposition is seen as heroes. It is something that we have learnt to live with."

LATENT CONCERNS NOT ADDRESSED IN TIME

Several veteran activists also noted that during the hustings, PAP may have glossed over hot-button issues that preceded Covid-19, such as the reserved presidency, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, as well as the perennial concerns over the Central Provident Fund (CPF), immigration and foreign talent.

For example, in rebutting SDP's false "10 million population target" claim, PAP had focused on questioning the integrity and honesty of the opposition party's leaders, without addressing voters' concerns about the country's population size and immigration policies.

While the activists felt that the opposition also did not seize on these issues, some felt that PAP should have done more to assuage voters' unhappiness over them before Polling Day.

This was especially since topics such as the reserved presidency lent credence to the WP's "no blank cheque" argument, which had taken on a life of its own, one retired MP said.

The former MP said: "Immediately when you say 'no blank cheque', voters, without prompting, will also form examples in their minds of how PAP had acted as if it had a blank cheque. Does that mean those concerns were not explained and properly addressed when the PAP Government carried out these (legislative and policy) changes?"

"When we change a law in the interest of Singaporeans, people somehow think we are changing things for our own advantage. To me, this shows that we have not explained policy well enough."

The "no blank cheque" catchphrase was first heard during a televised live debate between PAP's Vivian Balakrishnan, WP's Jamus Lim, SDP's Chee Soon Juan and the Progress Singapore Party's Francis Yuen.

Activists said that Dr Lim's closing remarks at the debate — that WP is trying to deny PAP a blank cheque — was an effective foil to PAP's call for a strong mandate. It was akin to former WP chief Low Thia Khiang's comments during GE2011 that the opposition is there to act as "a co-driver" to slap the ruling party if it drives off course.

A Chua Chu Kang GRC activist, who had served the party in the previous two GEs, noted that residents and the online community had repeatedly brought up topics such as the reserved presidency. "These are hot-button issues — just because they were lurking under the carpet in this GE does not mean that people have forgotten about them," he said.

Asked about this, MP-elect for Bukit Panjang Liang Eng Hwa said that he did encounter concerns over CPF and foreign labour from voters he interacted with in GE2020, which he was not able to address in the nine days of campaigning.

"I could not engage them fully and so I duly noted them, and will work towards hearing from residents on what more needs to be done and raise these issues in Parliament."

As a three-term PAP backbencher who faced off against Professor Tambyah, an infectious diseases expert, Mr Liang said that PAP candidates will always need to convince voters why there is a need for another PAP voice in Parliament.

Mr Liang had lobbied for public transport improvements in Bukit Panjang in the past, and has pledged to push for a rebalance in the country's reliance on foreign labour.

He said: "(While) I do not see myself as playing an opposition role in Parliament, if there is an issue that needs to be raised, then I will speak up."

CAMPAIGNING CURTAILED BY COVID-19

Party activists also described what was a mad scramble to put their plans into action after the GE was called.

Similar to previous elections, campaigning was left to each constituency team and not centrally controlled from the party headquarters, with the anchor candidates deciding on the outreach strategy needed for the area in which they were contesting.

At the branch level, each candidate could also decide how to reach out to residents in his or her precinct if there is time for more outreach, activists said.

But with Covid-19 affecting how the party could interact with voters, some of these de facto plans could have been improved ahead of time, a 26-year-old activist volunteering in the central part of Singapore said.

"What was confusing to us was that it was not a coordinated online campaign across the party. PAP is very strong in physical outreach, but because of Covid-19, campaigning became largely online and there was confusion as to what sort of messages to put out," he said.

Another senior activist highlighted how creative digital strategies employed in one constituency, such as the Marsiling-Yew Tee regular myTV webinars and the livestreamed walkabouts by Punggol West candidate Sun Xueling, were not replicated in other areas.

The Blackbox study had also found that PAP had far more social media mentions over the course of the campaign — a 72 per cent share, compared with WP's 18 per cent. Researchers attributed this to PAP's "superior resources".

Quantity, however, did not translate to quality. In terms of the overall campaign, 45 per cent of poll respondents felt that WP's campaign was better than expected, versus 40 per cent for PAP's.

The opposition, especially WP, had presented a more coherent digital campaign because it was leaner and could target its appeal to the constituencies where it was contesting, the PAP activists said.

Some noted that PAP also needs to rethink how it conducts its physical outreach to voters to cope with the difficulties of a short campaigning period.

An older activist serving the PAP branch in the opposition stronghold of Hougang said there was feedback from residents that candidates at other constituencies were not able to meaningfully engage voters who appeared more hostile to PAP. Some residents also complained to him that during home visits, they would open their doors to find an activist instead of the candidate.

He said: "Overall, PAP should improve on its ability to interact with voters because we failed to touch the hearts of people who disagreed with us. We need to do more to convince (people of) why PAP is good, and not why the opposition is bad."

Drawing lessons from GE2020, a senior party leader told TODAY that home visits and walkabouts may become a thing of the past.

“In the past, outreach was about how many homes candidates can visit, but to me that is not outreach, that is just reaching out. As an MP, I was not a big fan of running around the blocks... it has to be a constructive engagement, and for that you need a strategy over five years,” he said.

LATE SWITCHES AND DEPLOYMENTS

In one of the biggest surprises on Nomination Day, Mr Heng, who is PAP’s first assistant secretary-general, was moved to contest East Coast GRC from Tampines GRC, where he had been an MP for two terms. It was the first time that a PAP candidate earmarked for premiership had left his home turf.

PAP organising secretary Desmond Lee, who is also the Minister for Social and Family Development, was similarly moved to West Coast GRC from Jurong GRC, where he had been its two-term MP.

The moves were largely seen by analysts as a tactic to shore up the East Coast slate against WP, which had been making inroads in the constituency in recent years, and the West Coast slate against the Progress Singapore Party’s “A” team that included its founder, former PAP stalwart Tan Cheng Bock.

Some party activists were unhappy with the way candidates were “parachuted” into constituencies late in the process, leaving them with little time to prepare campaign materials and introduce candidates to the constituency.

One young activist said that some branches found out who their candidates would be just days before Nomination Day.

PM Lee said at a virtual press conference on Nomination Day that although he had hoped to deploy candidates early, the party only managed to finalise its slate “very late in the process” in part because the PAP Government had been busy dealing with Covid-19.

In some GRCs, including Sengkang GRC, activists said that candidates new to the area generally dragged down the votes for the constituency.

“Voters nowadays don’t like this sort of parachuting and throwing people in at the last minute,” one activist said.

She contrasted this with how, in GE2015, PAP gave its new candidates more time to be on the ground serving residents. PAP stalwart Ng Eng Hen said then that it had announced its slate early in a bid to be upfront with voters and encourage a “better type of politics”.

The former MP whom TODAY interviewed also described a shift in voting tendencies. In the past, Singaporeans used to plump for PAP candidates holding higher ranks in the Government, when talent was sparse and citizens held political office-holders in higher regard. This is no longer the case, he felt.

This shift, he reasoned, was one reason why WP managed to win Sengkang GRC against a four-man team that included three former political office-holders — Mr Ng Chee Meng, 51, a

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office; Dr Lam Pin Min, 50, Senior Minister of State for Health and Transport and Mr Amrin Amin, 42, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs and Health.

"Over the years, the tide has changed and the (younger) generations have a different view on how to vote for a political leader," he said.

Apart from the three former political office-holders, PAP's team in Sengkang included a new candidate — lawyer and long-time grassroots leader Raymond Lye, 54. TODAY's interviews conducted with Sengkang residents last weekend showed that some residents were unfamiliar with the PAP's slate, in part because the GRC was newly formed.

"It's like weighing newcomers against newcomers," a Sengkang resident said then. "In Sengkang, the only contestant we hear is Jamus."

NOT JUST THE YOUTH VOTE THAT SWUNG

In their preliminary assessments, many political observers attributed PAP's slide in vote share to the party losing a large section of votes from youths, who wanted diverse voices in Parliament and saw the need for checks and balances in government.

The party's loss in Sengkang GRC, which has a younger demographic compared with constituencies comprising mature estates, was a case in point.

Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee said in a lecture on Wednesday that PAP will have to understand the younger generation better to "win back their vote".

Singapore this year is at its "youth peak", with those aged between 25 and 35 forming the biggest bulge in the country's population pyramid, Professor Chan said at the Institute of Policy Studies' event.

During the post-election press conference, PM Lee had noted that the outcome reflected a desire by younger voters for a greater opposition presence in Parliament.

One longtime activist who volunteers at a ward with a younger demographic said he could sense that the ground was not as favourable to PAP as before.

"It could be because this was a younger and more educated demographic who may care more than bread-and-butter issues," the senior activist said.

WP chairperson Sylvia Lim said in an interview with news agency Bloomberg that the party was not expecting to win Sengkang GRC.

"But it looks like during the campaign, the momentum shifted and because our team in that area matched the profile of the voters — meaning that the oldest candidate was 44, the youngest was 26, they are all parents of young children."

Critics have even characterised PAP's political style as paternalistic, which does not sit well with the younger and more educated demographic.

"Youths feel like the Government is treating them like children," an activist in her 20s said, adding that the party needs to be more open to talking about traditionally touchy topics such as race, religion and rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community.

Another young activist, the 26-year-old volunteering in the central part of Singapore, said that since 2011, the PAP's youth wing has given feedback to the party leadership that young Singaporeans feel a need to change the culture within the party to be more accepting of dissenting opinions.

"It requires young thinking and I think the young MPs are ready... Those who came in are quite liberal — they are of the younger generation and they know exactly what's wrong with the system," the activist said.

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin, PAP MP-elect for Ang Mo Kio GRC and the youngest on the PAP's slate, noted that her generation of millennials grew up as digital natives, so expressing different ideas and opinions came naturally to this generation. But there are "signs of a maturing democracy across different demographics", she added.

"It's fairly clear that the party acknowledges that it does not have a monopoly of ideas, and is looking for different viewpoints," the 30-year-old lawyer said, referring to efforts such as Mr Heng's Singapore Together movement.

Asked if PAP will still be able to speak for the youth, she said that the party seeks to serve all generations: "In this election, PAP fielded 27 new faces — this signifies PAP's commitment to fresh ideas. I hope that citizens will give us the opportunity to prove ourselves and bring our different skills to the table."

While there is no data on how young people voted in the election, the Blackbox Research survey found that 24 per cent of respondents aged 21 to 24 intended to vote for WP, forming the highest share among the different age groups that intended to vote for WP.

It noted, however, that it was unlikely that the failure to capture the youth vote was a key factor behind the decline in PAP's overall vote share compared with GE2015. This is because WP's overall vote share had fallen from 12.5 per cent in 2015 to 11.2 per cent this election, Blackbox Research said, adding that voters under 30 represented only about a quarter of the electorate.

Party activists and PAP MPs-elect said they believed that the national swing against the ruling party came from another demographic apart from the youth: Middle-aged workers concerned about jobs, especially with the economy being battered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Those in the middle-aged working group, they are worried about their job security and we need to spend more time with them," Mr Liang said.

Ms Jessica Tan, PAP's MP-elect for East Coast GRC, said that she also sensed a shift among the middle-aged demographic in her ward about two or three years ago, before the pandemic struck.

"Many times, I've seen the rhetoric that it is the millennials, or the young, but I see it across Singaporeans," she said. She added that these residents, who are mostly in the middle-income bracket, have been approaching her to give feedback on various national policies that affect not just themselves.

“People care about things that are beyond themselves,” she said. “I was glad that there was acknowledgement of the work (we had done), but it really told me that being efficient, effective is not enough.”

“We have to do a better job marketing and bringing our message across. I think we sometimes come across as too complex.”

SUCCESSORSHIP TESTED

Late in November 2018, PAP’s succession plan was set in motion when Mr Heng was chosen as its first assistant secretary-general, paving the way for him to take over the reins from PM Lee as the country’s leader.

A senior party leader had told TODAY then that Mr Heng was chosen because the PAP central executive committee — the party’s highest decision-making body — felt that he “can rally the ground” and is the “first among equals” among the fourth-generation (4G) leaders.

Post-GE2020, one senior activist defended Mr Heng’s performance in the polls, stating that the PM-designate was not able to spend more time on the ground compared with the WP candidates, who included social media darling Nicole Seah.

Nevertheless, most party activists who spoke to TODAY were disappointed with the East Coast GRC results. PAP’s five-man team narrowly won against a WP team with 53.39 per cent of the vote, below the party’s national vote share.

Though PAP ultimately retained the often closely fought constituency, questions have arisen over whether PAP needs to rethink who should succeed PM Lee.

Party activists acknowledged the strong challenge that WP had presented in the East Coast GRC in past elections, though they had hoped that Mr Heng could win by a larger margin to prove that he could win the nation’s mandate in the future.

A former MP said that it had crossed his mind what would happen if WP chief Pritam Singh, instead of Ms Seah, had gone head-to-head with Mr Heng in East Coast GRC.

While some activists believe Mr Heng is valuable to the 4G team, they noted that his “East Coast plan” Nomination Day speech gaffe, which attracted much attention online, did not do him any favours, and the small margin his team won suggested he might not be the “unifying figure” needed for the country.

In a commentary published last Sunday, The Straits Times’ Editor-at-Large Han Fook Kwang questioned whether the challenges presented by the pandemic would also mean a review of Mr Heng’s claim to the leadership.

“Will the new circumstances require a different leader to rally and mobilise the people?” he asked.

While PM Lee has signalled his intention to hand over power by 2022, when he will be 70 years old, he pledged in his virtual lunchtime rally to see Singapore through the Covid-19 crisis with his older colleagues as well as the 4G leaders, before handing the reins over to the next team.

With a Cabinet reshuffle expected in the coming weeks before the new term of Parliament begins, talk is rife among party activists about whether someone else will be up for the prime minister's job.

Aside from the uncertainty over PAP's succession plans, those interviewed by TODAY said that the work on winning back voters must begin now.

Over the past week, the newly elected PAP MPs wasted no time, amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, in restarting their meet-the-people sessions over the phone and the internet to hear the concerns of residents.

Within the first 100 days, Mr Liang pledged to reach out to Bukit Panjang residents whom he had missed out over the course of the campaign, especially younger residents in his constituency.

"Only through engagement can we get a feel of what are the concerns of residents going forward," he said.

While the election results may have disappointed PAP diehards, activists said that many in the rank-and-file understand how the results represent a positive step for democracy in Singapore. They also lauded PM Lee's immediate move to give WP's Mr Singh the formal title of the Leader of the Opposition as a "strong signal" of the politics to come.

The 26-year-old activist said: "It is all part of a maturing democracy where we should show respect for each other's views. It's no longer about shooting down a person, but about a healthy debate over ideas. This GE was a sign of how debate should look like."