

The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2013

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INTRODUCTION

This document offers an extensive review, in the first section, of the changes in public policy that were announced in 2013 where the Singapore government sought to strengthen its social compact with the people. The second section provides a review of the political developments in the year. The third provides specific focus on a review of civic activism that took place in that time.

In terms of broad economic figures, the Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong in his New Year message for 2014 reported that Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.7% in 2013. This was in line with the 3.5–4.0% forecast by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and higher than the 2012 GDP growth rate of 1.1%. PM Lee also put the growth forecast for 2014 at between 2–4%.¹ The seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate for the third quarter of 2013 was 2.6% for residents and 2.8% for Singapore citizens, compared to 2.8% for residents and 3.0% for Singapore citizens in the same quarter of 2012.²

CHANGES IN PUBLIC POLICIES

Housing

The year began with a focus on the affordability and supply of housing. The government introduced two rounds of property cooling measures in 2013, bringing the total number of rounds of such measures introduced since 2009 to eight. The changes included “higher buyer's stamp duty, tighter loan-to-value limits, higher minimum cash downpayment for second and subsequent housing loans”, and introduced seller's stamp duty for industrial properties to discourage short-term speculative activity.³

Continuing its efforts to cool the housing market in 2012, the government promised at the start of the year to increase the supply of public housing units by at least 20,000 new Build-to-Order (BTO) flats in 2013, and 200,000 new homes by 2016 comprising 80,000 private properties, 10,000 Executive Condominiums (ECs) and 110,000 BTO flats.⁴ This would help to clear the backlog of applicants for flats.

By November 2013, Minister of National Development Khaw Boon Wan announced that the cooling measures had reduced foreign purchases in the private housing market since 2011, both proportionally and absolutely, and that property speculation as measured by the volume of sub-sales had decreased compared to 2011.⁵

Minister Khaw announced in December 2013 that the supply of new flats would decrease in 2014 as “three years of sustained ramp-up have begun to restore the balance in our housing market.... We have cleared the backlog of young families buying their first flats, with average BTO application rate for first-timers holding steady at below two times”. Demand from young families and first- and second-time buyers fell over the year, with the average application rate for BTO flats falling from a high of 5.3 applicants for each flat in 2010 to a low of 2.9 applicants for each flat in 2013. However, demand from singles for BTO flats remained high at 25.2 applicants per flat in December, albeit a decrease from 57.5 applicants per flat in July.⁶

Keeping Executive Condominiums affordable

Over the year, there was much debate over the role of public housing. The sale of an EC apartment for \$2.05m at the end of 2012 sparked a debate about the affordability of ECs, whether the EC market should be more tightly regulated, and if subsidies for those buying ECs were a “subsidy for the rich”. Members of Parliament (MPs) Irene Ng and Lim Biow Chuan suggested introducing restrictions on developers to prevent them from building ECs that were too large or expensive, while some called for the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to “go back to its original mission of providing affordable public housing for citizens”. On the other hand, some felt the government had a duty to make this type of housing even more accessible to people holding Professional, Managerial, Executive and Technical (PMET) jobs by raising the \$12,000 monthly income ceiling for ECs as prices in the private market were high. Others pointed out that there is “real non-speculative demand for them [large apartments] in Singapore” from multigenerational families and that the HDB should supply more four-bedroom and multigenerational homes. In response, the government capped the maximum strata floor areas of new EC units at 160 square metres, and restricted the sale of new dual-key EC units to multi-generational families.⁷

Increasing the supply of rental flats

A review of the Ethnic Integration Policy limits for rental flats was concluded, and it was determined that block limits for rental flats could now exceed up to 10% above the official quota. It was also announced that the supply of rental flats would be increased to 60,000, up from the government’s previous promise of 57,000 rental flats by 2015.⁸

More grants to help Singaporeans own their homes

At the National Day Rally (NDR), PM Lee emphasised that HDB flats would be kept affordable through grants for targeted groups of people as opposed to the lowering of prices across the board as this was the best way to maintain the value of existing homeowners’ flats. The Step-Up Housing Grant was introduced and the Special Housing Grant was expanded.

The Step-Up Housing Grant targets 3,000 families living in two-room flats in non-mature estates looking to upgrade — they would be given a \$15,000 Central Provident Fund (CPF) subsidy if they were to buy a three-room flat in a non-mature estate.⁹

The expansion of the Special Housing Grant marked a significant policy change. While it previously helped families earning up to \$2,250 in purchasing two- or three-room HDB flats, it is now expanded to help families earning up to \$6,500, and can be used to buy four-room flats as well. More than five in 10 households in Singapore could potentially benefit from the grant, which is expected to cost the government at least \$150 million each year.¹⁰

More housing options for different groups

The Parenthood Priority Scheme was also introduced to provide priority allocation to first-time married couples with a citizen child below the age of 16 years (including those expecting a child) obtain flats. Under the scheme, 30% of BTO flats and 50% of ‘the Sale of Balance Flats’ are aside for such couples. The Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme, which provides rental flats at selected sites to first-time married couples who need interim

housing waiting for the completion of their BTO flats was also expanded to include married couples comprising second-timer applicants, and widowed or divorced parents with children.¹¹

A three-generation (3Gen) flat scheme was piloted in Yishun as part of a continued effort to encourage extended families to live together. These flats come with strict eligibility requirements and restrictions to prevent speculative buying. The public response was positive — there were 1,152 applications for 84 3Gen and 260 five-room flats that were made available in the year. However, some expressed concerns that the flats, which are about five square metres larger than some existing five-room flats, were still too small and would not be able to accommodate multi-generation families comfortably.¹²

The Multi-Generation Priority Scheme was enhanced to allow parents to apply for a three-room flat in the same BTO project as their married child. Previously, they were only allowed to apply for a studio apartment or a two-room flat.¹³

The Studio Apartment Priority Scheme was introduced for the elderly, under which half the BTO studio apartments would be reserved for seniors applying for one near their current flat or near where their children live.¹⁴

For the first time, singles aged 35 and above who earned a monthly salary of \$5,000 or less were allowed to apply for new two-room flats in non-mature estates, 30% of which would be reserved for them. Previously, they were only able to buy resale flats. The Additional CPF Housing Grant and the Special CPF Housing Grant were extended to eligible singles. A single person earning \$1,125 or less a month would receive a \$30,000 subsidy when applying for a flat; this rises to \$60,000 if two singles apply together under the Joint Singles Scheme.

An Additional CPF Housing Grant of up to \$20,000 was also made available to singles who earn \$2,500 a month or less when buying resale flats.¹⁵

These moves addressed long-held views among single Singaporeans who felt that they had been underserved by the public housing system.

Marriage and Parenthood

In an effort to demonstrate political will in addressing Singapore's low fertility rates, the Marriage and Parenthood package was enhanced for the third time since 2001 in January 2013. With it, government spending on the package was set to increase to \$2 billion a year from \$1.6 billion in the previous year. The Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme described above gives first-time married couples with children the option of renting flats from HDB while waiting for their flats to be completed. Government co-funding for assisted reproduction technology was raised to 75% from 50% of the cost, and child delivery fees in public hospitals were also made uniform across the birth order. The government increased the 'baby bonus' payout, fathers are now given one week of government-paid paternity leave, and couples now have one week of shared parental leave. The option to take leave was also expanded to more mothers with the introduction of government-paid maternity leave for mothers doing contract work while parents of adopted infants under a year old will now get four weeks of paid adoption leave. A government grant of \$3,000 was also added to

Medisave accounts created for newborns and MediShield was extended to cover congenital and neonatal conditions.¹⁶

The Work-Life Works! Fund was enhanced to give employers more incentives to provide flexible work arrangements, and grants were introduced to help employers set up childcare centres at workplaces. Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Teo Chee Hean who is the minister in charge of population issues, highlighted that the package goes beyond offering monetary incentives as “It’s not really the amount of money that’s important [but] the kind of signals we’re sending, the kind of help and support we’re giving families”.¹⁷

Many welcomed the changes but were not sure they would have a significant effect on Singapore’s total fertility rate (TFR). While the decision to have children is a personal one and influenced by many factors, some critics pointed out related policies that need to be reviewed, such as the stressful education system so that the decision to have children would be less daunting.

In a REACH dialogue session on population matters, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law K Shanmugam stated what he thought was an important reason for the overall low number of new births each year — that Singaporeans are not getting married; while married couples have children, more than 30% of Singaporean women and 40% of Singaporean men in their prime remain unmarried.¹⁸

The Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) and the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) welcomed the new measures, however NTUC added that their suggestion for “a legislated right [for workers] to request for flexible work arrangements” was not included in the package.¹⁹

The Population White Paper and the Land Use Plan

The government released the long-awaited Population White Paper as well as a Land Use Plan in January 2013. The first provided a roadmap for Singapore to deal with its ageing population, while the second outlined the physical development strategy that would support the 6.5–6.9 million future population size proposed in that roadmap.

The White Paper was focused on “maintaining a strong Singaporean core”, “creating good opportunities for Singaporeans”, and ensuring a “high quality living environment” in the context of an ageing society. It proposed taking in between 15,000–25,000 new citizens each year till 2030, keeping the number of Permanent Residents (PRs) between 0.5–0.6 million — the same number as in previous years, and proposed that Singapore’s non-resident population number between 2.3–2.5 million by 2030. By 2030, the total population “could range between 6.5 and 6.9 million”.²⁰

This range represents a decrease in population growth compared to 1980–2010. The population would grow 1.3–1.6% from 2010–2020 and 1.1–1.4% from 2020–2030, as compared to 2.3% from 1980–1990, 2.8% from 1990–2000 and 2.5% from 2000–2010. The White Paper also included GDP growth predictions of between 3–5% till 2020 that were based on the proposal to ensure there is 2–3% productivity growth per year between 2010 and 2020 and 1–2% productivity growth between 2020 and 2030 (as compared to productivity growth of 1.8% per year from 2000–2010), with trimmed figures proposed for

workforce growth of 1–2% between 2010 and 2020 and 1% workforce growth between 2020 and 2030. This compared to an average of 3.3% growth in the workforce numbers between 1980 and 2010.

The White Paper was premised on the idea that two-thirds of Singaporeans would aspire to hold PMET jobs in 2030, an increase from the 50% of Singaporeans who hold these jobs today. It took the position that a dynamic economy is needed to provide these jobs, and that while “foreign workers... complement the Singaporean core in the workforce”, there is still a strong need to improve productivity in order to have sustainable economic growth and increases in real wages.²¹

The White Paper also pointed to the need to invest in infrastructure to accommodate a larger population, for example, expanding the rail network, building public housing and healthcare facilities, and providing spaces for the population to enjoy recreational activities.

These plans were detailed in the Land Use Plan issued by the Ministry of National Development. It included plans to build 700,000 new homes by 2030, more parks, a more extensive transportation network and more urban centres outside the central region.²²

Population White Paper debate in Parliament

In his opening speech on the debate on the Population White Paper and the Land Use Plan in Parliament on 4 February 2013, DPM Teo Chee Hean highlighted how the White Paper represented “a major shift — a significant slow-down in our rate of workforce and population growth compared to the path that we were on”. He also emphasised that the figure of 6.9 million was only a planning parameter, and that “we are not deciding now on the population trajectory beyond 2020. Nor are we deciding that we will have a population of 6.9 million in 2030”. The accompanying Land Use Plan also represented a significant change in policy, with the government now committed to building ahead of demand.²³

During the debate, People’s Action Party (PAP) MP Liang Eng Hwa proposed an amendment that emphasised that the White Paper supported “maintaining a strong Singaporean core by encouraging more Singaporeans to get married and have children, supplemented by a calibrated pace of immigration to prevent the citizen population from shrinking”, and highlighted that the “population projections beyond 2020 are for the purpose of land use and infrastructure planning, and not a population target”. The amendment also called for the government to “place priority on resolving current strains on the infrastructure”, to develop infrastructure “ahead of demand” and to “ensure that the benefits of our population policies, such as better job opportunities and salaries, flow to Singaporeans”. Lastly, it called for the government to “carry out medium-term reviews of our population policies and assumptions” to take into account changing needs and circumstances.²⁴

The Workers’ Party (WP) opposed the White Paper in Parliament. It presented its own plan titled “A Dynamic Population for a Sustainable Singapore” (in contrast to the White Paper, which was titled “A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore”). It focused on increasing the citizen birth rate by addressing institutional barriers that may lead couples to choose to have fewer children. These include improving work-life balance, introducing cheaper and high-quality childcare, making the education system less stressful, and making it easier for newlyweds to own flats. In addition, they also supported granting citizenship to

Singaporeans' foreign spouses to build up the citizen core. Their proposal also focused on increasing the size of the resident labour force by increasing the labour force participation rate of women and senior citizens.²⁵

Their proposal used the same productivity growth assumptions as the White Paper, but allowed for slower labour force growth that would be driven by increases in the resident labour force (as opposed to in the non-resident labour force). Predicted GDP growth rates were lower in the WP's proposal, but their final population projection of between 5.6–5.8 million in 2030 was also lower.²⁶ At the end of February, the WP published these in its paper titled "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore", laying out the arguments it made during the debate.²⁷

The Singapore People's Party Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Lina Chiam also opposed the motion.²⁸

The amended motion on the White Paper was eventually passed and adopted on 8 February 2013. All 77 of the PAP MPs present in Parliament during the vote chose to adopt the White Paper with the amendments. Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) R Dhinakaran and Teo Siong Seng also voted in support of the motion. Those who voted against the White Paper were the seven WP MPs, two WP NCMPs, SPP NCMP Lina Chiam, and three NMPs — Faizah Jamal, Janice Koh and Laurence Lien; 13 in all. NMP Eugene Tan abstained from voting.²⁹

The public's reaction to the White Paper

The public reactions were generally critical. There were concerns about overcrowding and the need to protect the Singaporean core and identity, and frustration that the government had not taken greater heed about slowing the pace of immigration.³⁰

Some questioned the assumptions behind the White Paper, for example, four vice-presidents of the Economic Society of Singapore felt that the government should not help "uncompetitive firms that rely on cheap foreign labour to stay afloat", and should tighten workforce growth figures further. They argued that economic growth in the region is a "positive sum" proposition rather than a competitive threat — the growth in the regional economies would present economic opportunities to Singapore.³¹

Professor Wolfgang Lutz, a National University of Singapore Society Distinguished Professor and Founding Director of the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (Austria), proposed a different method of calculating the old age support ratio. He felt that this indicator of the burden of an ageing population should be one that takes into account rising education levels that tend to result in "a more productive workforce, which stays healthier and works for a longer period". Providing a rather radical view, he said that this would mean that the optimal TFR could be 1.7 rather than the traditionally used TFR of 2.1.³²

Population White Paper protests

Unhappiness with the White Paper was manifested in three protest rallies at Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park organised by Gilbert Goh, the founder and president of transitioning.org, a website set up to provide support to the unemployed. These were held on

16 February, 1 May and 5 October, and featured speakers from different sections of society. Attendance at the first two rallies was high, with estimates of 3,000 to 4,000 Singaporeans turning up. The third rally saw a smaller turnout of 1,000 Singaporeans.³³

Nizam Ismail

In April, partly a result of the fallout from his participation at the first Population White Paper protest, Nizam Ismail stepped down from his position as a director on the board of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and as chairman of the board of the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) linked to AMP, citing pressure from the government. In a blog post, Nizam described how “two Ministers” were concerned about his participation in his personal capacity as “a speaker at the Hong Lim Park protest;... as a panellist at a WP Youth Wing Youthquake Seminar; ... [and] his critical leanings on social media”. The two Ministers allegedly threatened to “withdraw all funding from AMP” unless Nizam refrained from such activities. Following this, Nizam also stepped down from the Suara Musyawarah feedback panel, a ground-up independent effort to get views from the Malay-Muslim community on issues, and decided not to speak at the second Hong Lim Park protest held in May.³⁴

However, it must be noted that these allegations were denied by AMP chairman Azmoon Ahmad and the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim.³⁵

Questions were subsequently asked about where the line between social activism and political or partisan activity was, and whether or when the civil society organisations an individual is associated with should be affected by comments made in an individual’s personal capacity.³⁶

Population Growth in 2013

Singapore’s total population grew by 1.6% to 5.4 million, its slowest growth since 2004. The TFR in 2012 was 1.29, up from 1.20 in 2011, and the citizen population grew by 0.9% to 3.31 million. The slowdown in population growth came mainly from the numbers of non-resident population, due to “tightened foreign manpower policies and weaker economic conditions”.³⁷

Budget 2013

Budget 2013 was titled “A Better Singapore: Quality Growth, An Inclusive Society”. It focused on measures to support the process of restructuring Singapore’s economy as the number of foreign workers in the workforce is tightened as a result of the national population policy; and to build a more inclusive society through progressive taxation and the strengthening of social safety nets. The Budget promised more help to businesses in designing jobs suitable for older Singaporeans and to make flexible work practices more common.

The first pillar of the Budget — “Restructuring for Quality Growth” — tightened foreign worker policies by raising foreign worker levies, cut the Dependency Ratio Ceiling in several industries, and made the eligibility requirements for the S Pass and Employment Pass more stringent. These changes were accompanied by a three-year package designed to help businesses in the restructuring process. The package included the new Wage Credit

Scheme (WCS) where the government would pay part of the increase in wages over the next three years; enhancements to the Productivity and Innovation Credit Bonus; and a Corporate Income Tax rebate. Government support for projects designed to promote collaboration across industries and between businesses was also increased.

The second pillar of the Budget — “Building a More Inclusive Society” — included measures to promote social mobility by increasing spending on the pre-school sector and on disadvantaged students; increasing the progressivity of the tax structure for residential properties and passenger cars; extending more help for those on the Public Assistance Scheme and for government pensioners; and allocating greater funding to Medifund, Eldercare Fund, and the Senior’s Mobility and Enabling Fund.

Also significant was the expansion of the Workfare Income Supplement to cover 30% of the citizen workforce, and the increases to payouts under this programme. Direct assistance was also provided in the form of an extra Goods and Services Tax (GST) voucher, Medisave top-ups, Service and Conservancy Charges rebates and personal income tax rebates. Families with young children, elderly members, and members with disabilities would also enjoy a lower foreign domestic worker levy rate.

A review of healthcare financing was announced, with the aim of reducing the out-of-pocket share of medical expenses and expanding insurance coverage.

Lastly, 20 new Social Service Offices would be established to act as “one-stop shops”, making it easier for those who need social assistance to receive it.³⁸ More details about this can be found in the section titled “Social policies”.

Reactions to Budget 2013

Many felt that the government was moving in the right direction. However, there were calls for it to do more to help the middle-income earners who were concerned with the rising cost of living. Also, some felt that the tightened foreign worker policies did not go far enough.³⁹

Among the opposition parties, the Reform Party (RP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) pushed for the introduction of a minimum wage, arguing that the WCS scheme would not be able to effectively close the income gap or raise productivity. The SPP felt that the Budget was moving Singapore “in the right direction”, but that it should do more in the area of “economic restructuring”. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) welcomed the government’s efforts to redistribute wealth in the Budget, but felt it “did not focus enough on the needs of the middle class”. On the other hand, they were also uncomfortable with the WCS as it used taxpayers’ money to raise wages.⁴⁰

In Parliament, the WP argued for a higher top marginal tax rate of about 25% to make these taxes even more progressive, pointing to the very wide top income tax bracket. Said WP chairman and MP Sylvia Lim: “...there is clearly scope to have more tiers and higher rates, say up to 25%, for those who earn above certain higher thresholds”.⁴¹ WP MPs urged the government to look into issues regarding cost of living, especially for low-income families and workers, as well as into issues on work-life balance. The need to help caregivers was also raised, and a suggestion was made to expand the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme to “private preschool operators and not-for-profit religious or racial groups”.⁴²

The tightened foreign worker policies and the proposed WCS attracted much attention in the media and in Parliament. The Singapore Manufacturing Federation “welcomed the Budget as it highlighted the need for businesses to be innovative and productive”. However, businesses felt that there was limited scope for increasing productivity in some businesses that were labour-intensive, such as small restaurants. Others felt that Singapore’s “limited market size” made small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) less willing to invest heavily in raising productivity. Some businesses were also concerned about the uncertainty they would face after the WCS came to an end in three years’ time. There were others who felt that the three-year time frame was sufficient to allow companies to make adjustments and increase their productivity to afford workers higher wage levels.⁴³

Most MPs supported the WCS, “saying it is generous and innovative, and will ensure Singaporean workers keep their jobs while giving companies time to restructure with less foreign manpower”. However, they were worried that small businesses and their workers would not benefit from the scheme, and that it could “spark a wage war among employers, adding to inflationary pressure”. MPs also supported the tightened foreign worker policies, but cautioned against going too far lest SMEs be too adversely affected.⁴⁴

Labour Policies

Progressive Wage Model and accreditation

The NTUC said it took a multi-pronged approach to increasing the wages of low-wage workers. This approach comprises the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), accreditation or licensing of service providers and contractors, and the National Wages Council’s quantitative guidelines.⁴⁵

Eight sectors have agreed to implement the PWM, which was introduced by the NTUC in 2012. The PWM sets “benchmarks for increases in the wages of workers in various sectors if they upgrade their job skills and achieve higher productivity”.⁴⁶ To provide companies with more incentives to implement the PWM, the government also pledged to engage only accredited cleaning companies for new cleaning contracts from April 2013 onwards.⁴⁷

The NTUC announced that it would next work on introducing the PWM model in the security and landscape sectors. It would also seek to introduce the accreditation schemes in more sectors so that the PWM will be “the norm for over 100,000 low-earners”.⁴⁸

Help for “knowledge workers” and Professionals, Managers, and Executives (PMEs)

The NTUC announced plans to widen the PWM to include “knowledge workers” — those “whose jobs deal with ideas and information”. The goal is to help “highly educated workers get more productive” as well as help those with limited education rise up the salary scale through training and qualifications.⁴⁹

Two centres will also be set up to help PME find jobs and to provide “legal help and career tips for work-related problems”, and a third virtual centre for PME would come online by mid-2014. NTUC said it would seek to lift the unionisation rate for PME from 20% to 25%. This would be done by forming partnerships with professional bodies representing white-collar workers and by making changes to the Industrial Relations Act that expand the “scope of union representation for PME”.⁵⁰

PMEs would also benefit from the Fair Consideration Framework and changes to the Employment Act and CPF Act.

Fair Consideration Framework

In September, the Fair Consideration Framework was announced in response to increasing complaints about nationality-based discrimination in hiring, especially in the banking, services, and IT sectors. The framework requires companies with more than 25 workers that are looking for foreign PMEs for jobs with salaries of up to \$12,000 per month to first advertise these positions for 14 days on a new, free job portal. They will only be able to hire foreigners under an Employment Pass after this 14-day period. In addition, firms that only “go through the motion” could face greater scrutiny from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM).

In addition, the minimum qualifying pay for Employment Pass applications for fresh graduates was raised from \$3,000 to \$3,300, the third such rise since 2011.

Speaker of Parliament and former NTUC deputy secretary-general Halimah Yacob said that the framework was a step forward, and represented “the first major signalling on the part of the government that you must give priority to Singaporeans ... Singaporeans first”.⁵¹

These changes were generally welcomed by business and employer groups, with many saying that the framework represented a good balance between giving Singaporeans a fair chance at jobs and not making it overly difficult for companies to recruit staff. It will be in force from August 2014.⁵²

Changes to the Employment Act

Changes were made to the Employment Act to cover PMEs earning up to \$4,500 — this gives them sick leave benefits and provides greater protection against unfair dismissal, among others.

Non-workmen earning up to \$2,500 per month, such as “clerical staff and front-line service staff” were also given “working hours-related protection such as hours of work, overtime (OT) and work on rest day pay and annual leave, etc.”⁵³

A 25% cap was also imposed on deductions to employees’ salaries for “accommodation, amenities and services, to prevent excessive deductions to their salaries”.⁵⁴

These changes should benefit approximately 450,000 workers and most will take effect from April 2014.⁵⁵

Changes to the CPF Act

The CPF Act was changed to raise penalties faced by employers who “do not pay, underpay or are late in contributing to their workers’ CPF”. New penalties include a jail term and increased fines, with the maximum fine for a first-time offender doubled to \$5,000.⁵⁶

Education

Childcare — increasing choice and quality while keeping prices affordable

The 2013 Budget doubled the government's expenditure on pre-schools over the next five years to \$3 billion in an effort to increase the number of pre-schools and their quality. It was announced that 20,000 more childcare places would be created by 2017 — enough spaces for one in two children, an increase from one in three now — and the Ministry of Education (MOE) would open 15 new kindergartens over the next three years specifically to pilot curriculum that will ultimately help to upgrade the quality of pre-school education in Singapore, but also to provide high-quality yet accessible pre-school education in the heartlands and disadvantaged children. Higher salary grants would be given to anchor operators to help them hire better educated staff; all their teachers should hold a degree or diploma, an increase from 80% of their teachers now. Scholarships and training grants will also be available for teachers. A new autonomous agency — the Early Childhood Development Agency — was set up in April to oversee the pre-school sector.⁵⁷

More government subsidies were also announced for working mothers, and tiered based on household income with lower-income families receiving the most; “families with monthly household incomes of \$2,500 or less will be subsidised up to \$740 a month, making childcare virtually free as median fees are about \$750”.⁵⁸

In a significant change, the pre-school tender process to rent out state-owned properties was changed to place more emphasis on the affordability and quality of the programmes the operator offer. Previously, sites were awarded to the highest bidder in an open tender process. Under the new process, held behind closed doors to prevent bidding wars, the rental price offered, the affordability of registration fees charged to parents, the operators' track record, the quality of the programmes to be offered and the extent the pre-school will help disadvantaged students are factors in the selection process — these elements are given a 50%, 20%, 15%, 10% and 5% weighting, respectively. Operators have to stick to the registration fees quoted in their tender proposal — previously they were allowed to raise fees after notifying parents and the government.⁵⁹

In an effort to expand the quality and number of mass market pre-school programmes, the anchor operator scheme, which was previously only open to non-profit operators, was opened to for-profit operators in June. Commercial operators are allowed to apply for grants to open pre-school centres in the heartland in exchange for keeping fees below \$720 a month for full-day childcare.

More support was also promised to pre-school centres run by voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs). They are now eligible for grants that cover up to 50% of the start-up costs for centres in HDB estates, an increase from 20% previously.⁶⁰

Lastly, rental subsidies were offered to operators that set up centres in commercial buildings — these subsidies are targeted at small and mid-sized operators, who together run about 80% of the childcare centres in Singapore. In return, fees of operators under the scheme would be capped at \$850 a month for full-day childcare, \$210 a month for kindergarten, and \$1,450 for infant care for three years. Also, grants covering 50% of the set-up costs were announced for commercial building owners who set up childcare facilities at workplaces. Developers will be given additional floor area if they allocate space for childcare facilities.⁶¹

Modifications to the primary school system

In his NDR speech, PM Lee announced that 40 places in the Primary One Registration Exercise would be set aside for children who “have no prior connection with the school” (Phase 2B and 2C). This was in response to public sentiment that entry to the most popular schools was becoming more competitive, with children of alumni having an advantage.

The second major change announced at the NDR was to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) grading system. Wider bands would now be used for grades, similar to the system at the ‘O’ levels. This is to “reduce the excessive competition to chase that last point”.⁶²

Greater flexibility in the secondary school system

Also in NDR speech, PM Lee announced that secondary school students would be given more flexibility to take subjects at different levels based on their performance in the PSLE. For example, a student in the Normal (Academic) stream who does well in mathematics in the PSLE will be allowed to take that subject at a higher level — at the ‘O’ level standard. A Normal (Tech) stream student will be allowed to take subjects at either the ‘N’ or ‘O’ level standard.

Making Edusave more inclusive

In the same speech, the PM announced that Edusave contributions will also be given to every child between the ages of 7 and 16, including those that are “madrasah students, home-schoolers, [and] overseas students”.⁶³

Tertiary education – a third law school

In October, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat announced that Singapore’s third law school will be established at SIM University. It will have a “strong applied curriculum”, and “while it will provide a general law degree, there will be a strong focus on the specialist practice areas of criminal and matrimonial law”.⁶⁴ This new law school is part of ongoing efforts to broaden the range and increase the accessibility of tertiary education.

Meritocracy tempered

There has been increasing debate over the fairness and the outcomes of Singapore’s meritocratic system over the past year.

Soon Sze Meng, a frequent contributor to *The Straits Times*’ opinion section called for the need to ameliorate the “excesses of meritocracy” by putting “social mobility and social cohesion at the heart of policies” and ensuring that “each generation enjoys equality of opportunity”. Another public intellectual Donald Low contrasted two types of meritocracy — “trickle-down meritocracy” and “trickle-up meritocracy” — and argued that spending on social goods to provide “housing and good health care”, “retirement security and social protection against contingencies like involuntary unemployment” and to reduce inequality were necessary in order to “save meritocracy from itself” by limiting the rise in inequality that comes as a result of “trickle-down meritocracy”.⁶⁵

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong also acknowledged the need for a “compassionate meritocracy” that is “fair and inclusive for all — not just those who are lucky in their

backgrounds or genetic endowments”. DPM Tharman argued for a “broader meritocracy recognising different strengths in different individuals” and a “continuous meritocracy where it doesn’t matter so much what happened when you were in Sec 4 or JC 2 or when you finished your Poly or ITE, but what happens after that”.⁶⁶

Transport

Changes to public transport fares

In June, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) began a year-long trial aimed at reducing the number of passengers using the rail network at peak hours. The train ride would be free for commuters who exit at any of 16 designated Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations in the city area before 7.45am on weekdays, while those that exit between 7.45–8am on weekdays will get a \$0.50 discount on their train fares.

There was surprise at this move — that one could get a free ride at all in Singapore — but commuters said that the scheme would change their travel patterns provided their employers are flexible enough to allow them to leave work earlier if they start earlier.⁶⁷

In November 2013, the Fare Mechanism Review Committee established in June 2012 proposed concession schemes for low-income workers and persons with disabilities — which would be funded by the government; travel concessions for polytechnic students and those studying full-time in private institutions; free travel for children under seven years old (as opposed to the current policy of free travel for those under the height limit of 0.9m); concession passes for the elderly; and monthly travel passes for adult users to put a cap on transport costs for heavy users of public transport, among others. It was estimated that the suggested new concessions would benefit some one million people. All, apart from those for low-income workers and persons with disabilities would be cross-subsidised by those paying full fares.

The Committee recommended that the Public Transport Council (PTC) keep close watch on the affordability of fares for the average as well as low-income commuter.

It also suggested changes to the fare revision formula. One of the changes proposed were to make public transport fares less dependent on the cost of housing and cars by removing these two goods from the inflation component of the formula. It suggested introducing an energy component that would accurately account for the increasing proportion of electricity and fuel costs in any transport operator’s expenses.

Applying this formula to fares in 2013 would lead to a 2.1% increase in fares, the same as under the old formula. However, the Committee also recommended that transport operators contribute 20–50% of any fare increase to a fund to provide travel vouchers to the lowest-income group.

The Fare Mechanism Review Committee’s recommendations were accepted by the government. Public reaction was positive with regard to the new concessions, particularly for those targeted at polytechnic students and persons with disabilities.⁶⁸

Both SBS and SMRT submitted applications to raise fares. Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew “urged the PTC not to grant any fare increase that would exceed the average national wage increase this year”.⁶⁹

Strengthening transport infrastructure

The Land Use Plan released at the beginning of the year proposed building more integrated transport hubs to make transfers easier, increasing the coverage of the rail network and improving the quality of service, bus network and develop cycling infrastructure.

From now till 2030, Singapore’s rail network will increase from 100km to 360km, giving Singapore a rail density of 54 rail km/million population, comparable to that in London and representing a significant improvement in the public transport infrastructure. The number of trains will also be increased.

The bus network would be expanded under the Bus Service Enhancement Programme announced in 2012, which is expected to add 40 new bus services and 800 new buses.⁷⁰

Cycling infrastructure will also be strengthened to encourage the use of bicycles to get around towns. Improvements include extending the off-road cycling network and piloting bicycle-sharing schemes.⁷¹

The Land Transport Masterplan 2013 was released in October 2013 and included most policies previously announced in the Land Use Plan. In addition, lifts would be installed at overhead bridges to increase accessibility and 200km of sheltered walkways would be built to improve first and last mile connectivity. As much as 700 km of cycling paths will be added by 2030, making it easier for cyclists to commute around towns and to work in the city.⁷²

Some of the suggestions from members of the public on improving the transport infrastructure included making car-sharing more attractive — for example, by exempting these cars from bidding for a Certificate of Entitlement or charging lower vehicle tax rates, and providing more convenient designated street parking spaces for these shared cars — and introducing ferries to complement land transportation.⁷³

LTA and the environmental impact of its plans

The proposed 50km Cross Island MRT line, which would run from the East to the West of the island, drew criticism from the nature activists as it would involve construction works across the Central Catchment Nature Reserve. NMP Faizah Jamal spoke in Parliament about how this reserve comprises four reservoirs and “the oldest patches and some of the least affected forests” in Singapore.

The Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) proposed an alternative route that would go around the reserve but would add 1.7 to 2 km to the Cross Island Line, and some four minutes in travel time. The LTA agreed to postpone its Environmental Impact Assessment till nature groups have had time to study the “effects of different rail-line alignments” on the environment.

NMP Faizah Jamal described how maintaining a good working relationship with policymakers has paid off — the LTA looked to the group of activists who had led the

campaign to prevent Lower Peirce Reservoir from becoming a golf course in the 1990s when they wanted to get feedback on the proposed Cross Island Line. This was because the LTA recognised from past interactions with the group that they “are not troublemakers, [and] they will have something to say”.⁷⁴

Healthcare — Changes Announced in the NDR

The Community Health Assist Scheme (CHAS), which provides subsidies for outpatient medical and dental treatments to lower income Singaporeans, was expanded to include those aged under 40 years old; previously those below 40 were not eligible for the scheme.

The PM also announced that the age limit of the coverage of MediShield will be removed — previously coverage stopped at age 90 — and the programme will be made universal. The elderly — those who have dropped out of the programme, and those with pre-existing illnesses — will be given coverage again. The programme will be renamed MediShield Life, and will also provide “better protection for very large hospital bills”. PM Lee emphasised that the new MediShield Life scheme will need to “break even”, and that premiums will have to be higher. However, the government would help those who are unable to afford the premiums. One of the ways this would be done is through a Pioneer Generation Package aimed at helping the pioneer generation pay their MediShield premiums.⁷⁵ A committee was appointed to consult the public on the changes and make its recommendations in 2014.

National Day Rally 2013

The 2013 NDR marked the culmination of the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) process that was announced in the 2012 National Day Message and Rally. PM Lee shared some of the findings from the process, which involved 50,000 people and dialogues held in multiple languages. It found that people wanted to see the following in Singapore: “opportunities to lead fulfilling lives, to realise one’s potential”, people “coming together to build a better Singapore”, the “assurance that our basic needs can be met [and] that we do not have to face life’s uncertainties alone”, “closer community ties, stronger social cohesion, a warmer kampong spirit”, and “trust between the Government and people, trust among Singaporeans”.⁷⁶

In response to this, PM Lee promised Singaporeans that there would be a shift in the balance between the role of “the individual, the community and the state” in taking care of people’s needs, where the “community and the government will have to do more to support individuals”. In that regard, more grants were provided to help many more including middle-income Singaporeans own their homes — this marked a significant expansion from previous policies targeted more at the low income. MediShield Life, an expansion of the current MediShield programme that would provide lifelong coverage to all Singaporeans, was also announced. Lastly, policy changes to strengthen social mobility and reduce the stress placed on children in the education system were announced as discussed earlier.⁷⁷ These have been described in detail in the sections above.

The speech was generally positively received by analysts. To quote one, Donald Low said that “we have recalibrated the balance between the state, the market and the individual. The orientation is correct now”. Also, a REACH survey of 853 respondents aged above 25 years

old found that there was strong support for the policy changes announced in the NDR speech. The sample was “largely representative of the population”.⁷⁸

However, there was some scepticism about the government’s ability to deliver on promises of affordable housing, and some expressed a distrust of the government.⁷⁹

The WP supported the introduction of MediShield Life, pointing out that it “is in line with the Workers’ Party call for a universal hospitalisation insurance to cover acute bills”; and the move to make Edusave contributions to students in Madrasahs, “something that has been advocated by the Workers’ Party in Parliament”. It also welcomed moves to make HDB flats more affordable.⁸⁰

The SPP supported the use of wider bands in PSLE grading and providing 40 places in primary one for children with no alumni or sibling connections to the school. However, they raised questions about the low level of spending on social protection and reiterated their support for a minimum wage policy. They also questioned if it was really possible for someone earning \$1,000 a month to afford a two-room flat and have a sustainable lifestyle, given that some low-wage earners have “freelance jobs such as cleaning and care taking” that do not earn CPF contributions. Lastly, they urged the government to “look more closely” at the “real issues... overpopulation, an inadequate public transport infrastructure bursting at the seams, and a deteriorating healthcare system”.⁸¹

Social Policies

Social Service Offices (SSOs)

One of the new policies announced in the 2013 Budget was the opening of 20 new SSOs in HDB towns. They would be introduced to provide “better co-ordination of government and community help in the local area”. Four centres would be established by the end of 2013 at Kreta Ayer, Jalan Besar, Jurong West and Bukit Panjang/Choa Chu Kang. Four more centres would be set up by the middle of 2014 at Ang Mo Kio, Bedok, Queenstown and Sengkang.⁸²

These SSOs would not duplicate the work of the Family Service Centres (FSCs), but would play a co-ordinating role instead. Officers at the SSOs could refer families who need help to the FSCs, and can also “link FSCs up with the relevant agencies if the families they are working with need financial assistance”. While the SSOs would take over some of the roles of the Community Development Councils (CDCs), the CDCs would have a new role to play — that of an “aggregator role” that involves working with “corporate partners, as well as community partners, which will include the family service centres. They will also leverage on their close connection with the ground and grassroots organisations”.⁸³

Defining poverty

Towards the end of the year, a debate ensued over the need for Singapore to set a poverty line. WP NCMP Yee Jenn Jong and NMPs Laurence Lien and Tan Su Shan raised questions in Parliament about whether Singapore would set an official poverty line. In response, Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing said that a poverty line would not “fully reflect the severity and complexity of issues faced by poor families, which could include ill health, lack of housing or weak family relationships”. He added that

using a single poverty line could result in a “cliff effect”, where those who are genuinely needy but are above the poverty line are unable to get assistance. He argued that Singapore had a “*kueh lapis*” method of tackling poverty that had different layers of help to address the diverse social needs of Singaporeans especially the poor. For example, a large number of Singaporeans qualify for education, housing, healthcare and childcare subsidies, while those who need further help are eligible for Workfare, ComCare and Public Assistance. PM Lee later added that “we have moved beyond that point [where a poverty line is useful] and I don’t think that a definition will help us to improve our schemes”.⁸⁴

However, some argued that the multi-dimensional nature of poverty does not preclude a poverty line — rather, that other non-monetary measures could be considered when looking to define poverty. Yet others argued that setting a poverty line could help to “focus the efforts of the government, social sector and philanthropists according to common indicators arising from locally identified needs”.⁸⁵

Others also suggested that the government release a regular “poverty situation report” on the status of the underprivileged that tracks efforts to help them through statistical data and the use of key indicators such as “wages, access to education and affordability of essential goods”.⁸⁶

Two notable ground-up movements emerged this year — the movement to Chope Food for the Needy started by an individual on Facebook that encouraged people to give money to hawkers to be used for meals for those who cannot afford them. Also, some Nanyang Technological University students did a documentary called *Growing Up with Less* that showed in a vivid way, the lives of several low-income Singaporean families.⁸⁷

Another movement that started in 2013 was Caritas’ Singaporeans Against Poverty, which was designed to raise awareness about low-income families in Singapore and their challenges.⁸⁸

Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

Singapore ratified the UNCRPD in July 2013, and it came into effect in August 2013. This signalled Singapore’s commitment to “ensuring that persons with disabilities are treated equally with dignity and respect”.⁸⁹

National Service Review

Chaired by Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen, the Committee to Strengthen National Service was formed in March to “recommend measures to strengthen NS [National Service] as the critical institution for Singapore’s continued survival and success”. Second Minister for Defence Chan Chun Sing and Minister of State for Defence Maliki Osman each lead one working group looking into different ways National Service could be strengthened. The committee is expected to submit its report in early 2014.⁹⁰

Some of the ideas the NS Committee discussed include forming a Singapore Armed Forces Volunteer Corps for women and first-generation PRs who would like to be involved in Singapore’s defence; hiring more career soldiers so that regulars can take a more active role in training NS men; shortening the time period between the end of their studies and the start

of their NS; allowing NS men to choose their vocation based on their skills and interests, and offering better healthcare support.⁹¹

Media Policy

Media Development Authority of Singapore's (MDA) individual licensing framework

The MDA announced that from 1 June 2013 onwards, online sites that “report an average of at least one article per week on Singapore’s news and current affairs over a period of two months” and “are visited by at least 50,000 unique IP addresses from Singapore each month over a period of two months” would need to be individually licensed.

Previously, sites were automatically class licensed under the Broadcasting Act. The MDA added that the content standards under the individual licensing requirement were not different from the previous content standards that the online sites were on. The difference in the new licensing scheme is the requirement to “remove content that is found to be in breach of content standards” within 24 hours of MDA direction. Also, these sites would be required to put up a \$50,000 performance bond similar to that required of niche TV broadcasters. The licence must be renewed annually, similar to regulations under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act.⁹²

The MDA said that 10 online news sites would fall under this new regime — asiaone.com, businesstimes.com.sg, channelnewsasia.com, omy.sg, sg.news.yahoo.com, stomp.com.sg, straitstimes.com, tnp.sg, todayonline.com and zaobao.com. It also announced that it would be looking to extend this licensing framework to applicable “sites which are hosted overseas but reporting on Singapore news”. Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim explained that this new framework brought online media sites into the same regulatory framework as mainstream media — “whether we like it or not, Singaporeans are receiving news both from mainstream media and online sites. Our mainstream media is subjected to rules, why shouldn’t the online sites be part of the regulatory framework?” The Ministry said the new rules had been drawn up in consultation with industry players.⁹³

Questions were immediately raised about the lack of public consultation before the licensing framework was announced, and how the framework would be applied. There was also the general feeling that this was an attempt to rein in online news sites.⁹⁴

The Online Citizen (TOC), a not-for-profit socio-political news and commentary website, asked if it would need to apply for an individual license as its site traffic had crossed the threshold set by MDA. The MDA responded to say that “TOC does not fall within the online licensing framework”, but was not explicit about why the website did not meet the two criteria for individual licensing.

Many took issue with the broad definition of a “Singapore news programme” used in determining which sites would need to be individually licensed. A “Singapore news programme” was defined as “any programme (whether or not the programme is presenter-based and whether or not the programme is provided by a third party) containing any news, intelligence, report of occurrence, or any matter of public interest, about any social, economic, political, cultural, artistic, sporting, scientific or any other aspect of Singapore in any language (whether paid or free and whether at regular intervals or otherwise) but does

not include any programme produced by or on behalf of the government”. With regard to questions about whether blogs would be included in the online licensing framework, the government said that the “the regulations deal with news sites. It does not encompass blogs but should some blogs become news site... that is something we need to look at”.⁹⁵

#FreeMyInternet protests

There were protests against the new licensing framework both online and offline. On 6 June 2013, “more than 150 Singapore websites and blogs’ blacked out their websites to protest the framework in a campaign called #FreeMyInternet. These sites ranged from “sociopolitical sites like The Online Citizen (TOC) and TR Emeritus, to lifestyle, arts and parenting blogs”. However, there were also several blogs posted messages “explaining that they were not taking part because a self-imposed blackout was the incorrect response to Internet regulations”. A petition was started that called for “the immediate withdrawal of the Licensing Regime” that had garnered 4,279 signatures as of 18 December 2013.⁹⁶

A physical protest rally was also held at Hong Lim Park on 8 June 2013, attended by about 1,500 Singaporeans. It featured speeches by Andrew Loh, chief editor of publichouse.sg; Ravi Philemon, a former chief editor of TOC; Richard Wan, editor of TR Emeritus; blogger Roy Ngerng; writer Sudhir Vadaketh; and commentator Leong Sze Hian, among others.⁹⁷

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Speaker of Parliament

Then Minister of State for the Ministry of Social and Family Development Halimah Yacob was appointed Speaker of Parliament on 14 January 2013, making her the first woman to hold the position. This happened after the former Speaker Michael Palmer resigned from that role and as an MP over an extra-marital affair.⁹⁸

Punggol East By-election

Following the resignation of Michael Palmer on 12 December 2012, a writ of election was issued by President Tony Tan on 9 January 2013, to elect a new MP in his single-member constituency of Punggol East with Polling Day scheduled for 26 January 2013. The constituency of 31,649 registered voters had seen the only three-cornered fight in the 2011 General Election between candidates from the PAP, WP, and the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA).

Initially, five parties declared their interest in contesting the seat — the PAP, WP, RP, SDA and SDP. Several days before Nomination Day, the SDP proposed that the SDP and the WP run a so-called joint campaign, and that if the candidate was successful, “the SDP candidate will enter Parliament and the WP will run the Punggol East Town Council”.⁹⁹ This proposal received much public criticism and was rejected by the WP. The SDP eventually decided not to contest the by-election, citing public opinion against having a three-cornered fight.¹⁰⁰

The candidates that eventually contested were Koh Poh Koon from the PAP, Lee Li Lian from the WP, Desmond Lim from the SDA, and Kenneth Jeyaretnam from the RP. Lee and Lim had previously contested the constituency in the 2011 General Election.

The fiercest competition was between the PAP and the WP candidates. Some of the issues raised included the cost of living, the PAP's policies, the WP's performance in Parliament, and the controversy over Action Information Management (AIM) that erupted at the end of 2012; alongside these were other local issues such as the availability of childcare, transport links, delayed construction at Rivervale Plaza, and the lack of wet markets and hawker centres.

Koh adopted the campaign slogan "This is me", and described how he had lived in Punggol in his early years and grown up in a poor family, assuring voters that he was able to identify with them and understand their concerns. While he was guided in his campaign by DPM Teo, then Acting Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing, and then Punggol East caretaker MP Teo Ser Luck, Koh emphasised that he would be setting the tone of the campaign and that he was very much his own man. Some of the local issues he campaigned on were improving childcare facilities in the ward, allocating more resources to the community centre, and completing the construction at Rivervale Plaza.

Lee also highlighted how she grew up in a three-room flat and had to do part-time jobs to support her parents, telling voters that she had many similar concerns as them and understood how they felt. Some of the issues she raised were the need to increase the number of feeder bus services in the area, the lack of wet markets and hawker centres in the area, and the delayed construction at Rivervale Plaza.¹⁰¹

At the election rallies, the spotlight was thrown on the high and rising cost of living and the government's track record, with several members of the PAP stepping out to defend it. Speaker Halimah Yacob cited the government's plan to spend \$500 million to increase the number of nursing homes, senior care centres and senior activity centres. PM Lee also pointed to government spending on the public transportation, property cooling measures, and how it had helped those who had trouble coping with high utility bills and transport fares.¹⁰²

The WP's performance in Parliament was questioned, with PM Lee Hsien Loong saying that "I don't see any strong views or alternatives being presented by the opposition, whether it's the NCMPs or the elected MPs".

The RP too criticised WP's performance in Parliament, saying that they were "blindly obedient" and that they had voted with the government on every issue that counts".¹⁰³

The WP responded by pointing to the issues they had raised in Parliament. MP Chen Show Mao had suggested industry segmentation of dependency ratios for foreign workers, and MP Pritam Singh questioned the allocation of rental public housing for minorities, among others.¹⁰⁴

The AIM controversy from late 2012 (see below) was also raised, with MP Sylvia Lim asking "how a system developed with public monies could be sold to a political party, allowing it to terminate the system with one month's notice for possibly political reasons".¹⁰⁵

Online sentiment towards WP's Lee was more favourable, with those in several forum pages expressing that she came across as sincere, approachable and able to understand the issues they faced. Online sentiment regarding Koh was considerably harsher, especially in light of comments he made about not wanting "any sympathy votes" and the two cars he owned — "Well, everybody has a car. I have two, my wife drives one, I drive one. We're both professionals, we need to travel".¹⁰⁶

Lee won the by-election with 53.76% of the votes. Koh was runner-up with 43.09% of the votes, while RP candidate Kenneth Jeyaretnam received 1.18% of the votes and SDA candidate Desmond Lim got 0.56% of the votes.¹⁰⁷ This was the second by-election loss for the PAP since the 2011 General Election.

After the by-election, there was much discussion over whether the swing in votes from the PAP to the WP was due to the by-election effect, or whether it represented a significant increase in support for the WP at the expense of the PAP. A poll conducted after the election found that cost of living issues had the biggest influence on voters' choices, followed by the "desire to send a clear message to the government".¹⁰⁸

Hougang By-election Court Case

In July, an appeal by Hougang resident Vellama Marie Muthu was dismissed by the Court of Appeal — they found that her initial application to the High Court to decide if the PM is obliged to call for a by-election when a constituency falls vacant, after Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong of the WP lost his seat in February 2012 after allegations of an extra-marital affair, was "clearly premature". This was because the PM did call for a by-election in March 2012, before Vellama's application was heard in the High Court in April 2012. The Judges of Appeal Chao Hick Tin, Andrew Phang and VK Rajah stated that "while we accept that the Prime Minister should be accorded a measure of latitude in deciding when to call for election to fill a vacancy, it does not follow from this flexibility that he would, therefore, be entitled to defer the calling of an election to fill a vacancy indefinitely, or to simply declare that he would not be advising the President to issue a Writ of Election (unless he intends to advise the President to dissolve Parliament in the near future)".¹⁰⁹

WP's Performance

WP's performance in Parliament

Over the year, WP MPs made speeches and asked questions in Parliament on a range of issues. Low Thia Kiang suggested reviewing the CPF Minimum Sum and establishing "a reasonable yearly adjustment" that goes beyond just changes in CPI. Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh spoke against the political nature of the town councils. Gerald Giam and Lee Li Lian advocated for the same baby bonus and maternity leave enjoyed by married mothers to be extended to single and unwed mothers, Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap proposed introducing family care leave that would be "applicable in particular to caregivers of the elderly, the disabled and individuals with chronic illnesses such as stroke and kidney disease". Png Eng Huat pointed to the wage structure of low wage workers — for example, low basic pay and generous allowances for transport. Because overtime pay is calculated as a multiple of their basic pay, this makes it difficult in some cases for workers to earn more than \$1,000 a month. Png suggested that overtime pay for salaries below a certain level be

calculated as a multiple of the basic pay and allowances. Yee Jenn Jong suggested revamping the Anchor Operators Scheme in the childcare sector by allowing all childcare operators to bid for clusters of centres, considering the ability of operators to run the centres well, and preventing operators from changing their fees without approval from the Ministry of Social and Family Development. Chen Show Mao asked if concessions for seniors could be extended to help them “age actively and independently”.¹¹⁰

As mentioned in a previous section of this document, the WP also provided an alternative to the government’s Population White Paper with their own “blue paper” — “A Dynamic Population for a Sustainable Singapore”.¹¹¹

However, the WP also faced criticism from PAP leaders over the extent of their contributions. During the Punggol East by-election in January 2013, PM Lee said that he did not “see any strong views or alternatives being presented by the opposition, whether it’s the NCMPs or the elected MPs” while Minister of Defence Ng Eng Hen said that the proposals in the WP’s population policy paper were not new.¹¹²

Some of the most vigorous debates in Parliament between the PAP and WP members were over the Ministry of National Development (MND) review of the AIM Saga and over the cleaning of a hawker centre in a WP-held ward.

MND review of sale of Town Council (TC) software to Action Information Management (AIM)

In the wake of a dispute in December 2012 over the sale of TC software developed with public funds to AIM — which had three former PAP MPs among its directors — PM Lee announced in January 2013 that the MND would review the transaction and look at the nature of the TCs.¹¹³

In its report, the MND found that there was no misuse of public funds or conflict of interest in the sale of computer software used by PAP TCs to AIM, a PAP-owned company. It found that miscommunication and mixed interpretations of contracts in the handover process lay at the heart of the controversy. The report also highlighted the need to ensure continuity of services and urged a further review of TCs.¹¹⁴

WP MPs Sylvia Lim, Pritam Singh and Png Eng Huat responded in Parliament, speaking against the political nature of the TCs and of the need to maintain continuity of certain services and to safeguard “critical assets/systems still needed for the TC’s operation”. This was hotly debated, with Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan defending the findings of the review, telling Sylvia Lim “please, don’t behave as if you are the only patriot in this House”. This eventually led to a debate over the different rates TCs paid to their managing agencies which had to do with transparency, the procurement processes; and the interests involved in the appointment of managing agents of TCs. The report also said that handover processes when one political party has to transfer the running of the TC to another should be clarified and depoliticised in the future.¹¹⁵

Dispute between the National Environment Agency (NEA) and Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC)

A dispute arose between the NEA, AHPETC and hawker associations over who should bear the cost of cleaning two hawker centres in the constituency. The dispute seemed to centre

around whether parties thought the cleaning in question was a major annual spring cleaning or merely a quarterly minor spring cleaning, and the type of scaffolding required in the process — scaffolding needed to clean the high areas of the hawker centre or scaffolding to cover stalls to prevent them from being dirtied during the cleaning. The burden of paying for the different types of cleaning and for erecting different types of scaffolding fall on different parties depending on the nature of the cleaning to be done.¹¹⁶

The NEA accused the AHPETC of trying to “get hawkers at Block 538, Bedok North Street 3 to pay extra cleaning costs, and when that failed it deflected blame”. WP Chairman and MP Sylvia Lim responded to say that the NEA was “politically motivated to tarnish the image” of the AHPETC. This dispute eventually reached Parliament, with Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Vivian Balakrishnan accusing the WP of “false and untruthful” public statements to cover up the mistakes made by the TC they ran, and urging WP Secretary-General and MP Low Thia Kiang to investigate the matter. After the debate, WP MP Pritam Singh said that Balakrishnan was making “sweeping allegations” and implied that he was practising divisive politics.¹¹⁷

Low then said that there was no need for a further investigation as the WP had already investigated the issue previously. He also acknowledged that AHPETC and the NEA had “room for improvement” with regard to communication, and asked that all parties move on from the dispute as it was not “productive to continue debating and arguing” over the issue.

PM Lee also weighed in on this issue, saying that “Minister Balakrishnan’s statement in Parliament was not just his personal opinion, but the government’s official position which the Cabinet had approved”. PM also pointed to the importance of integrity and urged Low not to “leave these grave doubts about the integrity of his fellow MPs unresolved”.¹¹⁸

The public was divided, with some wanting Low to address the issues raised in Parliament, and others wanting both parties and the Cabinet to focus on other important national issues instead.¹¹⁹

Dispute between Hougang Central shopkeepers and AHPETC, licensing requirements for trade fairs

In November, 31 shopkeepers in Hougang Central petitioned the AHPETC to stop the trade fairs held outside their shops, saying that these trade fairs were held frequently and that many stalls at these fairs sold similar products as the shopkeepers, but at a lower price due to lower overheads thus undermining the latter’s business prospects.¹²⁰

AHPETC chairman Sylvia Lim said that it “is prepared to review” trade events scheduled for 2014, but that the schedule for the remainder of 2013 was already fixed, with a two-month long event scheduled to begin at the end of November.¹²¹

There was subsequently a discussion about the licensing requirements for these events. This happened after two events at Hougang Central and Kovan City scheduled to run for two months were told by NEA that they would need to apply for a licence for a trade fair. One of the requirements of this licence was a letter of approval from local stakeholders. The event at Hougang Central was cancelled while the event at Kovan City went ahead without a license for several days until it was shut down by the NEA.¹²²

The AHPETC's position was that the two events were "year-end festivities" that were "not what we typically know of as trade fairs, people selling food and all that" as they included "performances that are festive-related to draw crowds to the area". They have asked the NEA to clarify if a "year-end festivity" is the same as a trade fair as these events have different licensing requirements.¹²³

2013 Town Council Management Report

The WP-run AHPETC town council received a "red" rating, the lowest (of three grades), for its management of arrears in Service and Conservancy Charges in the report published by the MND on the management of town councils. Similar to 2012, the town council did not have a rating for corporate governance as its auditors were still finalising its financial statements. It received a "green" (the highest grade) rating for its cleanliness and lift performance, and an "amber" rating for its maintenance. Eight PAP-run TCs also received an "amber" rating for their maintenance.¹²⁴

The NSP

Change of Secretary-General

On 20 September 2013, Hazel Poa stepped down as NSP's Secretary-General, citing health reasons. Jeanette Chong-Aruldoss was unanimously elected as the new NSP Secretary-General.¹²⁵

Nicole Seah

In November, Nicole Seah posted a note on her Facebook profile page about how 2013 had been the worst year of her life. She talked about the pressure of meeting the expectations placed on her, difficulties in her personal and professional life, and the health problems she had faced in 2013.

She added she had been "naive, arm-twisted into making some pretty bad decisions ("Yup, the Presidential Elections was one of them. Terrible, irreversible mistake, completely underestimated what my lobbying could do"). There was speculation that this referred to her endorsement of Presidential Election candidate Tan Jee Say.¹²⁶

When Tan was queried about this, he merely replied that he was "surprised". He also said that "we can understand the stress that she has gone through. We are all here to support her. I speak from the bottom of my heart".¹²⁷

A few days after this, *Lianhe Wanbao* and *AsiaOne* published articles implying that Nicole Seah was dating a married man. In *AsiaOne*'s English article the headline was "Nicole Seah uploads photo of her with a man believed to be married" — this was contradicted by the text below the headline, which said that the man is divorced. Following anger from the online community, *AsiaOne* changed the previous headline on the article without adding an addendum noting the change. The article was taken down following more anger over this. *Lianhe Wanbao* and *AsiaOne* subsequently "unreservedly" apologised to Nicole Seah after she requested an "official apology".¹²⁸

The SDP

In June, Vincent Wijesingha became Singapore's first openly gay politician when he came out on his Facebook page, writing "yes, I am going to Pink Dot tomorrow. And yes, I am gay". (Pink Dot is a public rally in support of the gay cause.) Reactions online were generally positive — several people wished Wijesingha well and expressed respect for his decision to reveal he was gay. PAP MP Baey Yam Keng also praised Wijesingha's courage in coming out.¹²⁹

In August, Wijesingha announced that he would be leaving the SDP to "get more involved in LGBT and other human rights issues", saying that it would be "more effective to do it as an activist in the civil society arena". In a subsequent interview with *The Independent*, a news website, he expressed the view that Parliament is "the place where social change is ratified" and that "social change occurs in the community. When a question arrives on the floor of Parliament, it has already been progressed outside".¹³⁰

Public intellectual Cherian George wrote an essay in response to Wijesingha leaving politics, arguing that despite the current context where the government would prefer partisan politics to be kept distinct from civil society activism, "the simple reason why civil society action is a vital complement to electoral politics in a democratic society is that not every worthy cause is a vote winner. Often, it takes time for the majority to get on board. Sometimes, they never do. Government leaders then have to decide whether to do the right thing even though most voters remain nonplussed or outright opposed to change".¹³¹

Protests over the Malaysian Elections

Two protests were held against the Malaysian general election results at the Merlion Park on 8 May and 11 May. About 100 people, mainly Malaysians who wished to join in a broader nation-wide movement in their home country alleging that there had been massive electoral fraud, attended the first protest. Twenty-one Malaysians attended the second protest — these 21 were arrested while protesting. Of the eventual 55 people that Singapore police took action against, one had his work pass revoked while the visit passes of two others were cancelled. There are no details about the action taken against four more participants.¹³²

Singaporean social worker Jolovan Wham organised a protest at Hong Lim Park on 12 May to show "support to our Malaysian friends in their call for fair elections in their country" that was attended by more than 150 people. The protest was held without incident.¹³³

Subsequently, Penang's Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and members from the Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Democratic Action Party in Malaysia appealed for leniency for the protesters. Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded by saying that the protesters had persisted in their actions despite "repeated warnings that the protests were illegal" and that "their [the protesters] actions to involve foreign parties are attempts to seek special treatment and to further politicise what is essentially a domestic law and order issue in Singapore". The ministries added that "Singapore does not interfere in the domestic matters of other countries. In turn, Singapore will not tolerate outside forces interfering in our internal affairs".¹³⁴

CIVIC ACTIVISM AND OTHER SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

SMRT Bus Drivers' Strike

Four Chinese bus drivers were jailed in February for their part in the illegal strike in November 2012 by SMRT bus drivers. They were given sentences of between six weeks to seven weeks. The four, along with another bus driver who had been tried and jailed in 2012 for the same action, were deported back to China.¹³⁵

This was only after two of the bus drivers made allegations that they were “slapped, punched and threatened” while they were in police custody following the illegal strike. Subsequent investigation by the Police Internal Affairs Office found these claims to be “baseless”. The MHA and MOM also accused organisations and individuals who were repeating the allegation of playing politics, saying “in the guise of protecting vulnerable foreign workers, the NGOs and individuals have in fact exploited them for their own political ends”.¹³⁶

Also in January, then SDP politician Vincent Wijesingha apologised to Acting Minister of Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin for insinuating in a Facebook note in 2012 that Tan had been dishonest in his handling of the SMRT bus drivers' strike and that he lacked integrity. Wijesingha paid \$5,000 in damages, down from an original demand of \$20,000. Tan donated this money to charity.¹³⁷

Prosecution of Corruption

In June, the former Singapore Civil Defence Force chief Peter Lim was “found guilty of one criminal count of corruption” and admitted to seven others. He was sentenced to six months' jail.¹³⁸

In July, Edwin Yeo, an assistant director at the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) was charged with 21 offences, including eight counts of misappropriation of more than \$1.7 million and one count of forgery. He has yet to decide if he will claim trial.

The then director of the CPIB was also replaced by then Chief Executive of the Singapore Workforce Development Agency Wong Hong Kuan after this revelation.¹³⁹

Lastly, in October, the Chief of Protocol at the MFA was charged for “allegedly cheating the Government of nearly S\$89,000 by overstating expense claims”. The case first came to light in 2012.¹⁴⁰

In response to these developments, DPM Teo Chee Hean stressed that the public service “does not tolerate any form of corruption, misconduct, or wrongdoing”, and that those who do so will be brought to justice “without fear or favour”. On another occasion, DPM Teo also highlighted that while “the statistics do not show an uptrend” the government was “concerned that these cases should not undermine public confidence”.

In October, the Public Service Division announced that “all officers in the 136,000-strong public service will need to declare within a week after visiting the two casinos here more than four times a month, or if they have bought an annual entry pass”.¹⁴¹ This would help to minimise civil servants' exposure to risk.

Haze

In June, Singapore's Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) hit historic highs as a result of forest fires, ostensibly part of land-clearing practices in Indonesia. The MOM issued a statement reminding employers that "they have a duty to protect their employees' safety and health at work", urging them to make the necessary adjustments to safeguard their employees' health when PSI levels were high. However, MOM's actions came under criticism from some groups, who felt that a Stop Work Order should have been issued instead; the safety and health of workers should have prevailed over work, especially that of low-skilled workers who worked outdoors. The NEA's use of three-hour and 24-hour PSI readings was also questioned, with some asking for PSI readings to be given hourly.¹⁴²

In the midst of the haze, the government reassured the public that MOH had a stockpile of 9 million masks that it would be sending to pharmacies. One million masks would also be distributed to 200,000 low-income households. It also announced that the needy, young and elderly would get subsidies for medical bills incurred at "designated general practitioner clinics for respiratory problems and conjunctivitis". All Singaporeans would also be able to enjoy this subsidy at polyclinics.¹⁴³

Demand for masks and air purifiers rose dramatically and there were also allegations that people were hoarding masks and selling them at a steep mark-up. Despite this, there were some ground-up efforts to help those who might be more vulnerable to the effects of the haze — some groups distributed drinks and masks to those working outside, others distributed masks to those in HDB flats, while yet others offered their homes to anyone who might need temporary shelter in air-conditioned rooms. One such group was SG Haze Rescue, set up by Jeremy Chua; another was The Human Spirit Can (FIGHT HAZE), set up by Alvin Damien Tan and Tan Yong Heng.¹⁴⁴

The Indonesian minister coordinating the response to the haze angered many Singaporeans when he said that "Singapore should not be behaving like a child and making all this noise". He also said that Indonesia would not accept financial aid to address the forest fires from Singapore unless it was a sufficiently large amount. Several days later, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono formally apologised to Malaysia and Singapore for the haze. In response, PM Lee "wholeheartedly" accepted the apology and reiterated Singapore's previous offers of help.¹⁴⁵

In Parliament, after the haze had cleared, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim provided several examples of misinformation that occurred during the worst of the crisis, naming blogger Ravi Philemon as having spread a rumour that masks from the government stockpile would not be distributed to the general public. The Minister defended naming Philemon, saying that he had given a specific example because he did not want "the majority in the online community" to be "inadvertently associated" with the examples of misinformation he had provided earlier. Philemon defended his actions, saying that he had reposted his friend's comment about the supply of masks "with the intention of not asserting, but getting more information, on that topic".¹⁴⁶

Legal Challenges to Section 377A, and Contempt of Court Action against Alex Au

Two challenges were made to Section 377A, which criminalises gay sex in Singapore's Penal Code — one by Tan Eng Hong and another by gay couple Gary Lim and Kenneth Chee. Both these challenges claimed that Section 377A “is unconstitutional”. Justice Quentin Loh ruled in both cases to uphold Section 377A, pointing to Parliament's decision to retain this law in 2007, and saying that “Parliament has the mandate under our Constitution and system of law to make decisions on and surrounding controversial issues”.¹⁴⁷

An appeal by Gary Lim and Kenneth Chee to have a Queen's Counsel represent them before the Court of Appeal was dismissed by Judge of Appeal V K Rajah. The “application did not meet the requirement for admitting foreign senior counsel on an ad hoc basis under the Legal Profession Act, where there must be a “special reason” to do so”.¹⁴⁸

The Court of Appeal agreed to hear the two appeals by Tan Eng Hong and Gary Lim and Kenneth Chee together on the grounds that the issues in both cases were “essentially the same”.¹⁴⁹

In November, the Attorney General's Chambers (AGC) sought the High Court's permission to start contempt of court proceedings against blogger Alex Au for two articles he had published on his blog, *Yawning Bread*, that related to the cases above. The first article published on 5 October 2013 alleged that the Supreme Court deliberately manipulated hearing dates so that the Chief Justice (CJ) could influence the ruling on one of the above cases that challenged the constitutionality of Section 377A. This was because the CJ had been the Attorney General making the charges in the case of Tan Eng Hong. The CJ's ruling on the second would then be applied to the first. *The Straits Times* reported that the second article published on 12 October 2013 alleged that the judiciary was incapable of making independent judgments.¹⁵⁰

Justice Belinda Ang ruled that the AGC could begin contempt of court proceedings for the first blog post, but that there was insufficient basis for contempt in the second blog post. The AGC has now applied to the Court of Appeal for leave to begin contempt of court proceedings for the second blog post. The application will be heard in February 2014.¹⁵¹

Almost 170 members of civil society — academics, activists and artist — signed a statement supporting Au. The statement argued that “the right of free expression is enshrined in Article 14 of our Constitution”. It expressed concerns that the “AGC's action... reflects an overzealous desire to police public opinion” and pushed for Au's claims to “be rebutted in public”.¹⁵²

The AGC responded to say that Au's blog post made “allegations of wrongdoing by senior judicial officers”, adding that “the constitutional right to free speech and expression is not an absolute right, but is subject to limits which are expressly provided for in the Constitution”.¹⁵³

Leslie Chew

In April, Singaporean cartoonist Leslie Chew was arrested and investigated for alleged sedition. This was in response to a complaint filed against him by a member of the public over a cartoon posted under his *Demon-cratic Singapore* series that “suggested that Malays

are suppressed by the government”. Police investigations were completed in July and the AGC announced that Chew would not be facing charges under the Sedition Act.¹⁵⁴

In July, the AGC began legal proceedings against Chew for contempt of court by scandalising the judiciary. This was with regard to four comics that Chew had previously published on Facebook under the same *Demon-cratic Singapore* series. The AGC announced in August that it would not continue with contempt proceedings as Chew had taken down the four comics in question and publicly apologised for scandalising the judiciary.¹⁵⁵

The Hijab Issue

A debate over wearing the *hijab* in the workplace began after a question was asked at a forum about why nurses were barred from wearing them. Shortly after, an anonymous petition in support of over-turning that rule appeared online and received over 12,000 signatures. However, PAP MP Zaqy Mohamad criticised the petition, saying that “astro-turfing” — in which individuals can make a petition appear widely supported by signing multiple times using different fake email addresses — was not the right way to push for change. The debate over the *hijab* issue became more heated, with “abusive and disrespectful” language being used online against both the current Mufti and the previous Mufti.¹⁵⁶

Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim weighed in on the issue, saying that wearing the *hijab* at the workplace would be “very problematic” for some of the professions that require staff to wear a uniform — for example, police officers and those in the army are not allowed to “wear or display religious symbols on their uniforms or faces”. He also called for more “constructive dialogue” on the issue. DPM Teo and PM Lee highlighted the need to “balance all these different community requirements” in order to “maintain overall social harmony”.

Some of the public reaction included a call for clarification on the policy. A letter to the Forum Page of *The Straits Times* stated that “people are perplexed at the inconsistency [in where the *tudung* is allowed to be worn]. On the one hand, the Speaker of Parliament wears the headscarf. On the other hand, nurses are not allowed to wear the *hijab*, when it is more hygienic for them to do so”. The Fellowship of Muslim Students Association said that “we feel, respectfully, the comments [by DPM Teo and Minister Yaacob] did not explain the reason [justifying] the government’s view that a change of policy [would] affect overall social harmony, which is being implied”. The Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association also issued a statement saying that it felt that the *hijab* issue was still not satisfactorily resolved. They hoped the government would review its position and perhaps create a timeline for allowing the *hijab* to be worn in the workforce “gradually if not immediately”.¹⁵⁷

The WP called for “open-minded” discussions over the issue and spoke against politicising it. They also observed that Singaporeans had gotten used to seeing Muslim women wearing the *hijab* while working.¹⁵⁸

Two PAP MPs, Indranee Rajah and Hri Kumar Nair criticised the WP for straddling “both sides of the fence”. Indranee also criticised the NSP — who said they supported wearing the

hijab in all workplaces — and the WP for presenting a “difficult issue as a simple, straightforward matter, with no trade-offs or downsides”.¹⁵⁹

The Straits Times journalist Leonard Lim wrote about how the “same charge [levelled by Indranee and Hri Kumar] could be levied [*sic*] at the government too — it has studiously avoided articulating clearly its stand on calls to relax the *hijab* ban in certain professions”. He did however observe that the current political landscape made it difficult to take a “distinct stand” on the *hijab* issue.¹⁶⁰

The Independent and Breakfast Network (BN) asked by MDA to register under the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification

The Independent, a news and current affairs website that is owned by a “locally incorporated company”, was asked to register for a Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification by the MDA in July. It eventually submitted the forms on 5 December 2013.¹⁶¹

The BN, another news and current affairs website owned by an incorporated company, was asked to register for the same in November. In the middle of December, it announced that the BN website would be shut down and moved to Facebook.¹⁶² These events are distinct and separate from MDA’s new licensing framework for news websites.

This sparked a dispute between MDA and BN owner, shareholder and editor Bertha Henson, over Henson’s allegations that the registration process was “onerous”. The MDA later said that the BN site cannot operate in “any iteration” while BN is still a company — as a result of which, updates on the BN Facebook page were stopped. MDA reiterated that it was not taking issue with the content on BN but that “rather, it is the mode of operation... via a corporate entity, which means there is greater possibility for foreign influence”.¹⁶³

However, when Henson made moves to close down the Breakfast Network Pte Ltd (BNPL) so that she could perhaps continue to use the BN Facebook page, Twitter account and website, the MDA said that Henson “had not clearly indicated to us [MDA] who would own and run the various online iterations of Breakfast Network, where these services cease to exist under the corporate entity... BNPL. We can only advise her when she has clarity herself on the next steps”.¹⁶⁴

Henson responded by asking if the MDA was “making up rules as it goes along”, and argued that: “As for who the people ([running BN’s social media platforms] are, I am tempted to say, what business is it of the MDA? If the problem is whether volunteers are getting foreign funding to run social media, then may I respectfully point out that there are plenty of social media groups which have political and religious content?” Henson also released her correspondence with the MDA to allow readers to form an opinion on the issue themselves.¹⁶⁵

Commenting on these developments, Cherian George argued that the “Breakfast Network’s death by red tape” marked the end of the “17 years of ‘light touch’ Internet regulation”, and that “Singapore has now stumbled into the company of authoritarian regimes that are prepared to outlaw politically inconvenient blogs”.

The “Anonymous” Cyber-Attacks

Cyber-attacks

Websites in Singapore were hit by a series of cyber-attacks in the last quarter of 2013.

In October, a PAP Community Foundation website and the Ang Mo Kio Town Council’s website were hacked by someone known as The Messiah. Shortly after these two events, a video uploaded by someone claiming to belong to “Anonymous” threatened to “bring down Singapore’s infrastructure”. This seemed to be in response to MDA’s new licensing framework for news websites discussed earlier. The individual also urged Singaporeans to join the protest on the 5 November 2013 by “dressing in black and red” and by blacking out their Facebook profile photos.

The video claimed to be fighting for the rights of Singapore’s citizens, saying “no government has the right to deprive their citizens the freedom of information”. However, the individual in the video did not receive much support from the online community. Howard Lee, spokesman of the #FreeMyInternet movement clearly distanced the movement from the video. A letter written to the Forum Page of *The Straits Times* shortly after, questioned Anonymous’ tactics saying that “its violent means run counter to its goal of a more democratic Singapore”.¹⁶⁶

Subsequently, a blog page of *The Straits Times* was hacked, along with the Seletar Airport website and several Singapore Press Holdings websites including *straitstimes.com* and *AsiaOne*.¹⁶⁷

PM Lee made a strong statement on the issue, saying that the authorities would “spare no effort to try and track down” those involved, and that they will be “punished severely”. Following this, the Istana and Prime Minister’s Office websites were “compromised”. However, no data was lost from both these sites.¹⁶⁸

Following the arrest of James Raj Arokiasamy under the Computer Misuse and Cybersecurity Act for the alleged hacking of the Ang Mo Kio Town Council website and other hacking incidents (see below), Minister for Law and Foreign Affairs K Shanmugam pointed to the fact that many of Singapore’s facilities are heavily dependent on information technology, and that attacks by hackers are “nothing short of terrorism”. Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said that “any form of cyber attacks or threats are actually threats on the people regardless if the intent was malicious or mischievous”.

However, the websites of 13 schools were hacked after these statements by an individual or group signing off as “Jack Rider”. The hackers did not gain access to privileged data. Following this, the Singapore Art Museum website was hacked and two duplicate MOM websites were created. The World of Sports’ website was also hacked by an individual or group called the Bangladesh Grey Hat Hackers.¹⁶⁹

Police also say that Arokiasamy was allegedly also responsible for the other websites hacked by “The Messiah” — *The Straits Times* blog the PAP Community Foundation website, and City Harvest Church co-founder Sun Ho’s website. He is believed to have operated alone and has been remanded at the Institute of Mental Health for a psychiatric evaluation.¹⁷⁰

Businessman Delson Moo and student Melvin Teo were charged with hacking the Istana website. Both cases will be heard in January 2014. Lastly, two brothers, Mohammad Azhar Tahir and Mohammad Asyiq Tahir were charged with a total of 16 cybercrimes between them, including the hacking of the Prime Minister's Office website.¹⁷¹

Million Mask March

The video posted by the man claiming to be from Anonymous called for Singaporeans to wear red and black to protest on 5 November 2013. Fifteen people are now assisting police after being seen on 5 November 2013 wearing or in possession of Guy Fawkes masks in support of the Million Mask March, a movement to commemorate Guy Fawkes Day.¹⁷²

Little India Riot

There was a riot in Little India on 8 December 2013, allegedly sparked after a male Indian national was knocked down by a bus and died. When Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) personnel arrived to render aid, the group of 100 men that had surrounded the scene started getting aggressive.

The riot lasted for about an hour and a half with initial reports saying that almost 400 people had been involved in the fracas with the police and emergency personnel. It was resolved after Singapore Special Forces policemen arrived on the scene, with no shots fired but this was after 39 officers were injured and 25 vehicles belonging to the public services were damaged.¹⁷³

PM Lee appealed for calm, pointing to the "vast majority" of law-abiding foreign workers in Singapore working hard and making contributions to Singapore. He added that it was important not to let "this bad incident... tarnish our views of the foreign worker community here".¹⁷⁴

Police investigation

Almost 4,000 people were interviewed in the subsequent police investigation that resulted in 28 suspects being charged in court, 57 people being repatriated and banned from re-entering Singapore, and 200 people given a formal police advisory for their part in the riot. Those given the formal police advisory are able to continue to work in Singapore as long as they abide by Singapore's laws.¹⁷⁵

Activist Jolovan Wham argued that the immigration authorities in Singapore "should not have arbitrary powers to revoke work passes and deport migrant workers" while Braema Mathi of the human rights NGO MARUAH suggested that the workers be allowed go before the courts before being repatriated.

In response, the Ministry of Law pointed to the strong deterrent effect that the current repatriation policy has, the expense of allowing every repatriation to be challenged in court, and said that the safety and security of Singapore citizens come first. It also said that the "due process for repatriation under our [Singapore's] law has been observed".¹⁷⁶

Committee of Inquiry (COI)

PM Lee announced on 9 December 2013 that a COI was to be set up. The committee was appointed on 13 December 2013 and headed by lawyer and former Supreme Court Judge G. Pannir Selvam. It was tasked to look into the “factors that led to the riot”, how officers handled the situation, as well as to “review the current measures to manage areas where foreign workers congregate, whether they are adequate and how they can be improved”; and would present its report in six months.¹⁷⁷

Cooling measures

A temporary ban was imposed on the sale and consumption of liquor in the Little India area over the weekend immediately after the riot — this ban affected the operations of 374 establishments. The LTA and the PTC also announced that bus services that bring workers to Little India would not be operating at certain times.¹⁷⁸

A revised set of measures were introduced from the second weekend following the riot. They will be in place for six months, till the COI makes its recommendations. This revised set of measures includes a ban on the public consumption of liquor and sale of alcohol by retail and wholesale outlets after 8pm on weekends, on public holidays and on the eve of a public holiday. The number of privately operated services that take workers from their dormitories to Little India would also remain reduced from the original levels.

Not surprisingly, these measures were not welcomed by shopkeepers in the area, who fear for the sustainability of their businesses.¹⁷⁹

Public reaction

Overall, the public’s response was measured. There was a large number of letters to the newspapers that acknowledged that the foreign workers who rioted were a small minority, and that the larger, law-abiding group should not be unfairly penalised. There were also many calls to understand these workers’ concerns better, improve their living standards if necessary, and make greater effort to integrate them into “mainstream” Singapore.¹⁸⁰

In a discussion organised by the human rights organisation MARUAH, Cherian George pointed to the measured and mature reaction online — the robust countering of xenophobic sentiment by others with more tolerant views — as a sign of the ability of the online community to regulate itself.¹⁸¹

The author wishes to thank Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh and intern Tan Min-Wei for their assistance with compiling this report.

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