

## 'A flight from the status quo': Analysts break down GE2020 results

**Dhany Osman**

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SINGAPORE — While the vote swing towards the opposition in the 2020 General Election (GE2020) was a surprise for many, it also marked a continuation of the demand for change expressed in GE2011, said analysts.

The results, which saw the Workers' Party (WP) earning a record 10 seats in Parliament thanks to its stunning victory in the newly formed Sengkang group representation constituency (GRC), also did not show a flight to safety for voters — something many expected to occur in an election held amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Unlike 2015, the results point to a flight from the status quo rather than a flight to safety. It is a clear expression of a vote for change, as was the vote in GE2011. This time, it is more significant than 2011,” said political analyst Eugene Tan.

“If the WP continues to grow in support, we can expect the move away from one-party dominance,” he added. Tan, who is an associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, was responding to queries from Yahoo News Singapore.

He said that while Singaporeans still believed that the People's Action Party (PAP) – which took home 83 parliamentary seats, with 61.24 per cent of the overall vote share – are best equipped to handle the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis, they also demanded a government that was “less paternalistic and more trusting of the people”.

Similar sentiments were expressed by the participants of an Academia.sg online panel that convened on Saturday (11 July) morning to discuss the election aftermath.

“My suspicion is that people are starting to think a bit more about what they want out of the government. And by government, I also mean the opposition,” said media scholar Terence Lee, one of the panelists.

Political scientist Elvin Ong, another panel participant, observed that the vote share earned by the three major opposition parties had also risen, and linked this to the desires of today's average voter.

“One can sort of categorise the moderate median voter in Singapore as having the political preference of: They want the PAP to still be in power but they (also) want to see more opposition voices to potentially challenge the PAP much more in Parliament,” he said. Ong is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia's Centre for South-east Asia Research.

Noting that there was a lot of nervousness about how the opposition would fare at the start of Polling Day on Friday, fellow panelist and lawyer Priscilla Chia said, “I think with this election, it is truly unprecedented. (COVID-19) is unexpected. There were a lot of uncertainties surrounding the election.”

“In 2011, we saw the swing towards the opposition. In 2015, it went back to the PAP. Today, another swing to the opposition. So what does this trajectory mean for the opposition, for the PAP, moving forward?” asked Chia, who is also involved in non-profit work with groups such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE).

### **The Sengkang victory**

While breaking down the WP’s victory in Sengkang GRC, Chia observed that the constituency encompasses “quite a bit of former Sengkang West SMC (single-member constituency), Punggol East SMC and a bit of Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC”.

“(This area) is a little under the radar, but has been quite a stronghold for WP,” she said.

Chia said that while Sengkang GRC is a relatively new constituency, the WP team fielded there – comprising a relatively younger slate of candidates, including 37-year-old He Ting Ru and 26-year-old Raeesah Khan – were quite representative of the area’s residents.

“Moving ahead, I think the WP will try to consolidate and build its regional identity here in Sengkang,” she added.

Another political scientist on the panel, Kevin Tan of the National University of Singapore, said the formation of a new constituency ahead of the election could have helped to level the playing field in the opposition’s favour as there would be no incumbent to challenge.

“The moment you create a new constituency, a new identity emerges. And then it depends on how you play your cards,” he said. Tan also acknowledged the WP’s “brilliant strategy” in contesting Sengkang, which saw its young candidates trying to dovetail their own identities with those of residents.

### **A ‘social media’ election**

Many have also dubbed GE2020 the “social media” election, given the digital campaigning efforts necessitated by the pandemic regulations – which barred activities such as physical rallies.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Carol Soon noted that online party activities had started even before the election was called on 23 June, citing as examples the Progress Singapore Party’s (PSP) meet-the-party session with its chief Tan Cheng Bock over Facebook Live and the Singapore Democratic Party’s (SDP) “Ask Paul Anything” sessions on its Facebook page.

“Another visible difference from past online campaigning is the visible efforts made to ‘show and tell’ the candidates. Besides party branding and policy proposals, the character and values of the candidates are important factors that can make or break an online campaign,” she said in response to Yahoo News Singapore’s queries.

Soon also highlighted the dangers of the online mud-slinging during the campaigning period, which also saw numerous police reports made against candidates and petitions calling for the resignation of a minister.

“They smack of citizen retaliation, on both sides of the political spectrum. Such behaviours may signify a potential division along partisan lines and if left unaddressed, it may have long-term repercussions.

“For one, we may see less online space for the middle ground to access unbiased information and speak up,” she said.

On the positive aspects of the digital electioneering, Soon pointed to citizens’ contributions – especially by the young – towards promoting healthy political conversations.

“This election could also be a youth-election but this needs to be studied further. During the campaigning period, young people took to social media and created content to educate citizens and their peers, many of whom were first-time voters,” she noted, citing as examples social media influencers on Instagram, the socialservice.sg website and videos by Our Grandfather Story.

“Citizens are trying to get others engaged in election issues based on facts and this bodes well for citizen engagement in Singapore,” added Soon.

Commenting on WP’s and PAP’s campaign content, Ong said the former’s evoked a sense of “authenticity” about the candidates, which gave viewers a sense of “who they are”. By contrast, he cited the example of Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat’s digital campaign efforts, which gave no sense of him as a person.

“I didn’t get a sense of who the ‘authentic’ Heng Swee Keat was,” said Ong.

### **Looking forward**

Regarding what’s in store for Singapore politics going forward, SMU’s Tan said that “it will likely be incremental where the erosion of one-party dominance is concerned”.

“The question is not whether but when that dominance will wither. It will depend on what the PAP does to manage the pace of political change and what the opposition does to dictate the pace of change,” he added.

Noting that the PAP’s fourth-generation leaders have their “work cut out for them”, Tan said they still have some way to go in establishing themselves as the type of leaders the country needs.

“Collectively, they know they can do better. Individually, they will have to reckon with the voters’ assessment. What matters now is how they respond to the change in voting to ensure that it does not result in a vote for radical change in future GEs,” he said.