

The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2015

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a review of the key developments in public policy and governance, changes in the political landscape, and cases of civic activism in 2015.

On 24 February 2016, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) announced a 2% expansion of the Singapore economy for the year 2015, down from 3.3% growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the preceding year of 2014. Growth was at its slowest rate since the 2009 recession and was close to the 2.1% growth projected for the year. MTI's growth forecast for 2016 is 1%–3% (Chia, 2016).

The seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate for the fourth quarter of 2015 was 2.9% for residents and 3.0% for citizens, compared to 2.6% and 2.6%, respectively, for the same quarter of 2014 (Ministry of Manpower, 2016). It is also worth noting that growth in the non-resident population slowed from 2.9% in 2014 to 2.1% in 2015, which can be attributed to the decelerating foreign workforce growth which was part of government policy to manage that more tightly (National Population and Talent Division, 2015). Singapore's total employment grew by a net figure of 31,800 or 0.9 per cent over 2014, the smallest annual growth since 2003 (Tan A., 2016).

On productivity and wages, a MTI report found that the growth in real average wages of resident workers over 2010 to 2015 was 1.1% per annum whereas labour productivity gains were 0.4% per annum. Labour productivity, measured by value-add per worker stood at 0.1% in 2015 while real gross median income grew 5.3%. MTI officials warned that it was unsustainable for real wage growth to outpace productivity gains without compromising the economy's competitiveness (Lee U.-W., 2016)

In terms of income equality, the Gini coefficient reported in 2015 remained relatively stable — 0.464 in 2014 to 0.463 in 2015. Taking into account taxes and government transfers, the Gini coefficient fell from 0.463 in 2014 to 0.410 in 2015, reflecting the effort of enhancing government redistribution (Department of Statistics, 2016a).

YEAR IN BRIEF

With 2015 tipped as an eventful year marking Singapore's 50th anniversary of the independence, the year also saw the passing of Lee Kuan Yew on 23 March. This led to a spontaneous, nation-wide outpouring of grief, especially among the young. Just as significant were the nature of the tributes from overseas and the stature of foreign dignitaries who attended the state funeral.

After the period of national mourning that brought to mind the legacy of Singapore's founding leaders and the impact of the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore's 50-year history, speculation grew about a general election (GE) which was eventually called on 25 August and held on 11 September 2015.

The PAP saw its vote share rise by 9.72% from the previous GE in 2011 to achieve an overall popular vote of 69.9%. The PAP wrested back the single member constituency (SMC) of Punggol East from the opposition Workers' Party (WP) that took it in January 2013. The WP was able to hold its seats in Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and Hougang SMC in an election where all seats were contested for the first time since independence.

There were significant changes in public policy to further strengthen social safety nets, to promote lifelong learning, improve access to public housing and healthcare, and raise the level of well-being of seniors.

The WP continued to face challenges from the PAP front bench in Parliament for its management of the town council that served Aljunied, Hougang and Punggol East (AHPETC) and was unable to resolve a court action brought by the Ministry of National Development (MND) to set conditions for the release of public funds for the operation of AHPETC before the year ended.

CHANGES IN PUBLIC POLICIES

Healthcare and Retirement

MediShield Life

MediShield Life (MSL) is designed to improve the existing MediShield system by becoming a more comprehensive health insurance scheme for all Singaporeans. In January 2015, the MSL bill was passed unanimously by the Singapore Parliament (Fang, 2015a).

The MSL expands on the previous plan in the following ways: It removes the age cap of 92; extends it from birth; eliminates the \$300,000 lifetime cap on benefits; and raises the yearly claims limit by \$30,000 to \$100,000. In addition, MSL covers individuals with pre-existing conditions, with the caveat that they have to pay higher premiums than for those without the pre-existing conditions (Ministry of Health, 2015a). On 21 September, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said that about 25,000 Singaporean residents would be required to pay additional premiums of 30% under the MSL scheme, and released a table of “broad categories” of ailments that would require additional premiums such as serious congenital conditions, psychiatric conditions, and cancers, to name a few. The MOH assured the public that it would adopt a “fair and compassionate” approach in identifying who would need to pay more and also added that there would be assistance and subsidies they could tap (Channel NewsAsia, 2015h).

MSL also lowers the cost of co-insurance payments. The deductible remains unchanged at \$1,500 for C wards and \$2,000 for B2 wards. It automatically replaces the existing MediShield portion of Private Integrated Shield plans, providing additional coverage if, for example, a plan-holder wishes to stay in a B1 or A ward.

To address the increase in premiums for MSL, the government committed to providing transitional subsidies to all that will taper off — from 90% in the first year to 20% in the fourth and final years, between 2015 and 2019. Further subsidies would be available after the four-year transition period to those on the lower end of the income scale.

Assurances were also made that low-income citizens who are unable to pay their premiums will not lose coverage, although there was a warning of punishment for those who wilfully choose to default.

During the parliamentary debate, WP Non-constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Gerald Giam expressed the hope that the process of means-testing and subsidy allocation would be automated, so as to ensure that no one in need would miss out on assistance in the face of “tough premium recovery” measures set out in the MSL bill (The Online Citizen, 2015).

The MSL scheme commenced on 1 November. Health Minister Gan Kim Yong confirmed that applications for subsidies, claims calculations and premium payment had been

automated. He recognised that there would be an ongoing need to explain how MSL worked, particularly to older Singaporeans, so they would understand and be assured about that (Kok, 2015).

Changes to CPF LIFE

In February, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Advisory Panel released its first report, where recommendations were accepted by the Ministry of Manpower almost immediately. The advisory panel was headed by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, President of the National University of Singapore, and included representatives from academia, unions, the social sector and grassroots. The panel was appointed by the Manpower Ministry in September 2014.

The report recommended a comprehensive suite of changes to improve the clarity, flexibility and adequacy in the CPF scheme. Notably the Minimum Sum was renamed the “Retirement Sum” to clarify its purpose to CPF members, and for the year starting 1 July 2015 would be \$161,000 (Ministry of Manpower, 2015a).

There would be three tiers to the Retirement Sum: Basic (BRS), Full (FRS) and Enhanced Retirement Sums (ERS). For 2015, these would stand at \$80,500, \$161,000, and \$241,500, respectively. In practice this means that the FRS is twice the BRS, and the ERS three times the BRS. As an indication, the monthly payouts for the schemes would vary according to which tier a CPF member is on, from \$660–\$720 for the BRS; \$1,220–\$1,320 for the FRS; and \$1,770–\$1,920 for the ERS for members who are 55 years of age as of 1 July 2015.

The improved higher ERS tier is new to the CPF system. Those without sufficient savings in the CPF accounts would be allowed to top up their CPF balances to utilise the scheme.

Also, notice was given that from 2017 to 2020, the BRS would increase by 3% annually to take into account projected inflation and increases in cost of living. In 2017 it would be \$83,000, increasing to \$90,500 in 2020. The confirmation of the Retirement Sum came off the back of a 10-year adjustment of the Minimum Sum (Prime Minister’s Office, 2014); from 2016 onwards, the adjustment would be lower and with less variation than in the decade before. This notice and predictability would allow people to plan which option they wished to take up.

Another change was to raise the interest rates for the first \$30,000 of CPF savings by 1%. This would mean that the first \$30,000 of CPF savings would have an interest rate of 6%, the next \$30,000 at a rate of 5%, and any subsequent savings above \$60,000 at rate of 4%. (Ministry of Manpower, 2015b).

Yet another reform would now allow CPF members to withdraw a lump sum of up to 20% of their Retirement Account savings in cash at age 65 — a modification from the previous limit of \$5,000 at age 55 regardless of whether they met the Minimum Sum. The change addresses concerns about financial flexibility when CPF members retire (Ministry of Manpower, 2015c).

Also, the CPF income ceiling was raised from \$5,000 to \$6,000, and contributions to CPF were raised for workers between 50 to 65 years old in order to ensure members have sufficient savings for retirement and to fund MSL premiums. For workers between 50 to 55 years old, both employers and employees would contribute an additional 1%. For those between 55 to 60 years old, employers would contribute an additional 1%; for those between 60 to 65 years old, employees would contribute an additional 0.5%.

The changes were generally welcomed although commentators noted that these only partially addressed the broader questions surrounding retirement adequacy for Singaporeans. Associate Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Donald Low described the changes as “important enhancements”, but noted that the manner in which the changes were implemented and explained to the public at large had to be done carefully (Low, 2015). CPF critic and blogger Roy Ngerng felt the changes were superficial and did not address what he considered to be the fundamental problems with the CPF system, such as the lack of a minimum wage and what he thought were low rates of return on CPF savings (Ngerng, 2015).

Budget 2015

Budget and Questions of Fiscal Sustainability

Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Minister of Finance Tharman Shanmugaratnam raised income taxes by between one to two percentage points for those earning more than \$160,000 a year, with the top rate applied to those earning \$320,000 or more raised from 20% to 22%. The changes are to be applied to income earned in 2016, which is taxed in 2017. DPM Tharman called the tax increase a “calibrated move” that would “enhance progressivity and strengthen future revenues, without significantly denting Singapore’s competitiveness (Williams, 2014).

He also incorporated returns generated by Temasek Holdings into the Net Investment Returns framework to provide the government with the additional fiscal resources to make investments in healthcare, human capital and transport infrastructure. The framework allows the government to spend up to 50% of Temasek Holdings’ long-term expected real returns along with the same from the Government Investment Corporation (GIC). The minister explained that when the framework was introduced in 2008, Temasek had been excluded from the framework because of uncertainty over how to project its expected long-term returns (Shanmugaratnam, 2015).

This move led to concern among some Members of Parliament (MPs) that it was shift away from prudent budgetary spending. Nominated MP Chia Yong Yong warned against the potential consequences of excessive social spending, saying that “I would also argue that if we lean too much to the left, we will not have much left” (Liang, 2015). The minister said that the government would remain true “to the values of fiscal conservatism” and not burden future generations because of the present’s social spending (Channel NewsAsia, 2015b)

In contrast, after the budget debate, former GIC chief economist and public intellectual Yeoh Lam Keong wrote on social media that while he generally approved of the changes in social spending, an opportunity had been missed to deal decisively with the conditions faced by the working poor. He suggested that had the top rate of tax been increased by a further three percentage points (to 25%), for instance, the government could generate enough resources to improve payouts through the Workfare Supplement and other transfer payments to that group of Singaporeans (Yeoh, 2015).

Silver Support Scheme

An entirely new scheme to help the elderly poor was introduced in 2015. The Finance Minister announced in the Budget that there would be a Silver Support Scheme to help the poorest 20% to 30% of elderly Singaporeans by giving them quarterly cash supplements of \$300–\$750 from the age of 65, for life, established based on how much each senior had earned through his or her working life.

The Scheme, first mentioned at the 2014 National Day Rally by the PM, was approved by Parliament on 16 August 2015 and will take effect in the first quarter 2016. Enrolment will be automatic.

In addition to that, a GST Voucher Seniors' Bonus was introduced to help the elderly cope with the cost of living (Shanmugaratnam, 2015).

During the debate in Parliament, MPs spoke about the need for flexibility in assessing eligibility for the Scheme, noting that there was a possibility that seniors who appeared to be adequately prepared for old age were actually living in poverty. The choice to make quarterly instead of monthly payouts as well as the quantum were issues that were also raised (Lee A., 2015a).

Law and Order

The Liquor Control Act

The Liquor Control Act was passed in Parliament at the end of January 2015 and came into effect on the 1 April 2015. It prohibits the consumption of alcohol in public after 10.30pm. Individuals found contravening these laws could face fines of up to \$2,000 and jail. Two "liquor control zones" were also established, one around Little India and another around parts of Geylang. Individuals found to be in contravention of the alcohol ban in these special zones would face more severe penalties. The police were given significant powers to enforce the ban, including discretionary strip searches (Lim Y. H., 2015).

The Government began its review of liquor control measures in September 2012. After several rounds of public consultation, the proposed laws were tabled in Parliament on 19 January (Chin, 2015). Second Home Affairs Minister S Iswaran spoke in Parliament about the numerous occasions of alcohol law-breaking that had occurred in recent times as another part of the motivation behind the law, noting that alcohol-related incidents were disproportionately higher in Little India and Geylang. Likewise, he quoted the Committee of Inquiry into the Little India Riot that happened in December 2013, which found that liquor had been "a major contributory factor to the major escalation of the riot" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2015).

The bill was passed with the support of all but one parliamentarian, Non-constituency MP Lina Chiam of the Singapore People's Party (SPP). Mrs Chiam criticised the bill as "legislative overkill", a critique that was reflected by commentary in online media (Chiam, 2015). Arffin Sha, writing for The Online Citizen, questioned if the government was being overly paternalistic and whether public consultation leading up to the legislation had been truly representative (Sha, 2015). Amongst the MPs who eventually voted for the law, several spoke about whether the law needed to be as stringent as it was.

Housing

Housing Matters and Property Price Cooling Measures

Measures implemented in June 2013 to moderate the rise of property prices, such as the Total Debt Servicing Ratio (TSDR) were left unchanged although stakeholders had asked for a liberalisation of them. Monetary Authority of Singapore Managing Director Ravi Menon explained that property prices had not softened enough to justify that (Lee M., 2015b).

This sentiment was echoed by Cabinet Ministers such as Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam and National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan. The latter said the aim of keeping the cooling measures in place was to bring about a "soft landing" for the housing

market and certainly not a crash. Mr Shanmugam told real estate investors not to hope for the removal of cooling measures even after the GE (Poh, 2015a).

Several MPs suggested that there was a danger of over-correcting the housing market. MP for West Coast GRC Foo Mee Har warned that the downward price trend of the housing markets could reach an unintended pace, especially in light of new housing supply that had yet to reach the market (Lee M., 2015a). This sentiment was echoed by others outside of Parliament and had been raised since the middle of 2014, when for example City Developments Limited (CDL) Executive Chairman Kwek Leng Beng warned of Singapore losing its edge as an investment destination (Ong, 2014). Real Estate Developer's Association of Singapore's (REDAS) Augustine Tan warning of a potential downward spiral of property prices unless the Singapore government engineered an exit from the cooling measures that would enable a "soft landing for the market" (Lee Y. N., 2015).

Meanwhile, the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) efforts to ensure first-timers could access public housing continued apace with more units being offered to the market to clear the numbers waiting for new flats. According to most recent figures from the Department of Statistics, the number of residential flats constructed in 2014 exceeded 27,000 — a marked increase from the 6,500 flats constructed in 2009 (Department of Statistics, 2016b).

At the 2015 National Day Rally, PM Lee announced additional measures to help Singaporeans, especially the poor, own their homes. These include the new Fresh Start Housing Scheme, which will give assistance to second-time HDB flat buyers currently living in rental units with purchasing two-room flats by offering them flats with shorter leases and stricter resale conditions. This scheme, the PM explained, would be tied to social programmes to help such families get back on their feet more firmly and sustainably.

An expanded Proximity Housing Grant was announced to help multi-generational families who wish to live close to each other. The income ceiling to purchase new BTO flats was also raised from \$10,000 to \$12,000; and from \$12,000 to \$14,000 for those looking to purchase an Executive Condominium. The household income ceiling for the Special CPF Housing Grant was raised so that two-thirds of Singaporean households would qualify for the grant, and the maximum grant amount was doubled to \$40,000 (Poh, 2015b).

Education

SkillsFuture

DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam said in his 2015 Budget Statement that "SkillsFuture" marked a major new phase of investment in Singaporeans which would happen throughout their lives. The government would support lifelong learning through grants and subsidies under the SkillsFuture Credit scheme, SkillsFuture Study Awards, and SkillsFuture Fellowships for those pursuing mastery in their fields, he explained. SkillsFuture Credit would stand at an initial credit of \$500 from the government for all Singaporeans 25 years old and above which can be spent on approved skills training courses (Saad, 2015a).

Under the SkillsFuture rubric, the Earn and Learn Scheme for Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and Polytechnic students will allow students to receive on-the-job training and a government-funded stipend to pick up job-relevant skills (Shanmugaratnam, 2015).

Immigration

Immigration Measures

Immigration continued to be a topic of interest in the year with opinion split between those who thought that the number of incoming foreign workers was still too high despite the

government restricting inflows, and business owners who remain concerned about a how tightening labour market was affecting business viability (Chang, 2015b).

In the 2015 Budget, the government announced that it would slow the pace of foreign worker tightening and defer hikes for levies of S-Pass and Work Permit holders until 2017 (Teh, 2015). These measures were not seen as a change of direction, but an adjustment of pace.

The government continued to reiterate its stance that the question of immigration was one of balancing competing needs. This was the central topic of a television interview with PM Lee on 2 August, where he discussed the difficult balancing act that the government took responsibility for. He said:

If we have no foreign workers, our economy suffers, our own lives suffer. [If] we have a lot of foreign workers, the economy will do well, [but] we have other social pressures, other problems with our society, which are going to be very real and which we have to take very seriously and which we cannot accept. Somewhere in the middle, we have a mix of evils; on the other hand, we may be able to find a spot where all things considered, this is something which balances our needs as well as our identity, as well as our economic requirements, and enables us to move forward. Then after three, four, five years we look at it again, we revise our view and we adjust our policy. (Channel NewsAsia, 2015d)

GOVERNANCE ISSUES

Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC)

DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam, in February 2014, directed the Auditor-General's Office (AGO) to audit the accounts of AHPETC (Lim, 2014).

The AGO released its report on the 9 February 2015 citing five major lapses in the management of AHPETC: The failure to transfer monies into the sinking fund bank accounts as required by the Town Councils Financial Rules; inadequate oversight of related party transactions involving ownership interests of key officers hence risking the integrity of such payments; not having a system to monitor arrears of conservancy and service charges accurately, hence the inability to ensure that arrears were properly managed; poor internal controls hence risking the loss of valuables, unnecessary expenditure as well as wrong payments for goods and services; and the lack of a system to ensure that documents were safeguarded and proper accounts and records were kept as required by the Town Councils Act (Auditor-General's Office, 2015).

The report was debated in Parliament on 12 February 2015. MPs for Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC refuted charges of misconduct. MP Sylvia Lim, Chairman of the WP as well as of AHPETC, stated that the town council's managing agent, FM Solutions and Services (FMSS), did not have the power to award itself contracts and that tenders called by AHPETC were awarded by a tender and contracts committee consisting of MPs and appointed councillors who provided oversight.

She added that overcharging for services by FMSS had not been intentional as the cost of services had been pegged to what the previous managing agent had charged the town council when it was under the PAP.

In addition, Ms Lim cited problems that arose when the WP took control of the town council, stating, as she had done before, that the incumbent service provider had pulled out of its

agreement, leaving the incoming town council with a significant amount of work that related precisely to managing its accounts (MyPaper, 2015).

MP Pritam Singh, also from the WP, reiterated that the evaluation of tenders was done by elected and appointed members of the Town Council (Othman, 2015). WP Secretary-General and MP Low Thia Khiang also argued that it was difficult to get competitive bids for the jobs tendered out by the town council because there were few who were willing to take the jobs in an opposition-held town council, and it therefore had little choice but to award the contract to the sole bidder (Chang, 2015a).

MPs from the governing PAP and the front bench disputed these explanations, questioning the sincerity of statements by the WP MPs.

The session ended with a motion on the AGO report, endorsing the report's findings and calling for a stiffening of the law regulating town councils. The motion was unanimously passed by the House, including the WP MPs. The AHPETC was given a 30 June deadline to submit its 2013 accounts, which were late. It was also asked to submit its 2014 accounts by 31 August (Tham, 2015c).

In May 2015, the Ministry of National Development's (MND) application for the appointment of independent accountants by the court to oversee the disbursement of government grants to AHPETC was dismissed by the High Court, with Justice Quentin Loh saying the ministry had not established the legal basis for the court to take such action, and that only the HDB and residents had the right to take action against the town council if they wished to. He added however that there were indeed "grave and serious questions that have been raised regarding the state of AHPETC's accounts," and that AHPETC had "ignored their duties and obligations" (Channel NewsAsia, 2015a).

The WP stated that the MND was withholding about S\$14 million in grants, without which the AHPETC could not make its mandatory payments to its sinking funds, as it did not receive sufficient income from its service and conservancy charges. The AHPETC also disputed the MND's choice of court appointed auditor, saying that the firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) was part of the initial AGO audit, and there were concerns about possible bias (Malinda, 2015b; Sim & Tham, 2015; Chong Z. L., 2015).

The MND chose to appeal the court's decision. In the meantime, AHPETC had submitted its FY2014/15 financial statements.

The subject of AHPETC became even more charged at the end of August and the beginning of September due to the GE, which coincided with AHPETC submitting its FY2014/15 financial statements. PAP candidates in this period pointed to AHPETC as a signifier of the WP team's inability to manage their local role. However, WP candidates, led by Mr Low, retorted by saying that local residents were satisfied with the general upkeep of the estates.

In the midst of the electoral campaign, the MND released figures to show that FMSS had posted a post-tax profit of \$2.04 million in financial year 2013/2014 and was presented as "grossly profiteering off its sole client, AHPETC (Ministry of National Development, 2015a)." Its profit had quadrupled in comparison to the previous year, while its revenue had increased by just 30% in that time. The profit margin was 23% whereas in comparison, EM Services that ran PAP town councils had a profit margin of 7%, as, reported *The Business Times* (Lee J., 2015)

The WP argued that FMSS had not been overpaid as payments to it were as contracted and that the company did not have to account to the town council for the profits it made.

Separately, AHPETC disputed certain payments made to FMSS in April and July of 2015 and wanted to get them back, to which Chairman of PAP and then MND Minister Khaw Boon Wan said, “So, if they have been paying in accordance with what was in the contract, then why are they suspending payment and why are they trying to claw back the money?” (Ng & Siau, 2015).

Further dispute arose during the election hustings about the state of finances in Hougang and Punggol East SMCs before the two entities were merged into AHPETC. The PAP asserted that Hougang Town Council (HTC) was in deficit and therefore benefitted from the merger after the 2011 GE. WP’s Low said that was not the case. The WP asserted that the Punggol East operating account was in the red when it received the constituency into the town council after the 2013 by-election, and that certain large sums the PAP said it had handed over were those to be locked into town council sinking funds (Tham, 2015c). The candidate for Punggol East from the PAP, Charles Chong then explained that the surplus in operating funds he had referred to in the 2013 handover belonged to the larger Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council that Punggol East had been part of before the by-election and that he had been misquoted (Yong, 2015b). He also asserted that the sinking fund it had handed over to WP — to the tune of \$22.3 million — was unaccounted for. This, WP said, was “incorrect and a malicious attempt at discrediting the WP. The sinking fund transferred from Punggol East to AHPETC is clearly accounted for” (Yong, 2015b; Tham, 2015c). With the swing of the SMC from WP back to the PAP in the 2015 GE, a protracted process of untangling the accounts was expected (Tham, 2015d). Chong who became MP said he was anxious to read the external auditor’s report on the ward, having received it from the WP team on 1 December.

In November, the Court of Appeal, in responding to a request by MND and HDB (as complainant) for a court-appointed accountant, ruled that AHPETC had to appoint suitably qualified independent accounts approved also by HDB, which should not be unreasonably withheld, to ensure that the lapses identified by the AGO report would be attended to; to submit monthly progress reports on that to the HDB; and to look into whether past payments it had made were improper and ought to be recovered (Sim W., 2015a). It also ruled that AHPETC make all outstanding transfers to sinking funds within three months. In doing so, it could decide whether AHPETC was to receive the grants-in-aid amounting to \$14 million previously offered by MND subject to the latter’s conditions, or raise the funds in any other manner to fulfil the requirement (Ministry of National Development, 2015b). The Court of Appeal also clarified that the court did not have the power to appoint accountants to safeguard funds disbursed by MND to AHPETC as previously argued by MND, and reinforced the guidance earlier set out by the High Court that it could only make rulings to ensure that the town council fulfilled its statutory duty as set out in the Town Council Act.

Hepatitis C Virus Outbreak

On 6 October, the SGH revealed in a press conference that 22 people had been infected with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) at its renal ward between April and June, with some cases detected only close to the time of this public disclosure. Eight people had died, with four of them directly linked to the infection and one case under review. It was revealed that SGH had made the initial identification of an unusual increase in the number of HCV infections in early June, and that it conducted its internal investigations with its leading theory that the infections had resulted from the use of multi-dose vials, possibly of insulin. SGH said it had taken immediate measures to stop that practice and tightened the scrutiny of internal work processes. It said that it had and would continue to screen other patients who had been through the renal wards as well as staff working there. MOH said that it had convened an Independent Review Committee led by the Director of the Institute of Infectious Diseases and Epidemiology and Clinical Director of the Communicable Disease Centre, Professor Leo Yee Sin to chair the committee.

The news raised questions among the public, journalists and bloggers about SGH's delay in informing MOH about the possible healthcare-associated infection (HAI) and in turn, the delay by MOH in informing the public. Also, it was unclear as to the precise number of people who were screened and infected. MOH and SGH explained the protocol and the precise processes of communication and investigations of the case, making the distinction between the reporting of "acute" and "chronic" diseases, and how HCV was detected especially if patients were asymptomatic.

The Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) Chee Soon Juan asked if disclosure of this HAI had been held off due to "political considerations" such as the GE, seeing that SGH had presented the information to the MOH in late August. "Why did he [MOH Minister Gan Kim Yong] wait another two months before disclosing the episode"? (Chee S. J., 2015)

The WP took the line of seeking clarification of the delays in public notification and screening, and of the protocols involved. The WP steered clear of imputing any improper motives to the healthcare and MOH officials involved. WP's Leon Perera did add in a statement of behalf of the party that it would suggest that the Independent Review Committee be reconstituted as a Committee of Inquiry under the Inquiries Act, which would require someone qualified to be a judge of the High Court as its member (Perera, 2015). It was noted that the members of the IRC constituted practising clinicians of Singapore's public healthcare institutions.

MOH's response to WP was that first, the IRC would benefit from the input of international healthcare advisors and second, that if WP had its doubts about the IRC process, that it should be prepared to lead evidence before a COI and substantiate allegations it might have regarding the integrity of the process taken by the IRC (Ministry of Health, 2015c).

PM Lee said on 10 October that the authorities would investigate and rectify what had gone wrong after proper investigation and recognised the need to be open and transparent about such incidents:

When something like this happens our approach must always be first... to find out what's wrong, to put things right, to safeguard the health and well-being of patients. Establish what happened, learn from the experience to improve and do better in future. And we also always have to be open and transparent with the public and with the patients about what has happened. Because we must maintain public confidence, and trust in the healthcare system. (Today, 2015d)

On 5 December, the IRC submitted its report which the MOH accepted on 8 December. It found that while the national surveillance and control systems to do with community outbreaks of infectious diseases as well as HAIs were in place and worked well, there was a gap in the system with regard to HAI with "unique characteristics" like HCV as it is not easily picked up through the regular system. There was no designated division with the responsibility and capabilities of dealing with unusual HAI like HCV. As such, there had been delayed recognition of the HCV outbreak in SGH and delayed escalation from SGH through many layers, up to the MOH. As such, the MOH would address the gap (Ministry of Health, 2015b).

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Passing of Lee Kuan Yew

Death and Funeral

On 23 March 2015, independent Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew passed away at 3am.

Earlier, on the 5 February 2015, Lee was admitted to SGH with severe pneumonia. This information was revealed on 21 of February by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) (Prime Minister's Office, 2015a). PM Lee Hsien Loong was also been admitted to SGH on 18 February to address a separate health concern (*The Straits Times*, 2015a). The elder Lee was said to be conscious but lightly sedated.

Many members of the public visited SGH to wish the elder Lee a speedy recovery, with the hospital setting up a covered corner for well-wishers to leave messages and gifts (Yong, 2015a). However, the elder Mr Lee would remain in hospital until his death, with the PMO releasing regular updates recording his gradual decline in health.

On 23 March, following the elder Mr Lee's death, the PM announced a seven-day period of national mourning (Prime Minister's Office, 2015b). Mr Lee's body was brought to the Istana where a private wake was held from the 23 to 25 March. On 25 March, Mr Lee's body was transported by gun carriage from the Istana to the Parliament House for a lying-in-state till 28 March. The cortege was then conveyed from the Parliament House to the University Cultural Centre on 29 March for the state funeral that was attended by many foreign dignitaries, after which, it was taken to Mandai Crematorium for a private funeral with family and invited guests (State Funeral Organising Committee, 2015).

Public officials were unprepared for the magnitude of public sentiment and desire of so many Singaporeans to pay their last tribute to the late Mr Lee. The official State Funeral Organising Committee had to take the decision to extend public visitation hours at the lying-in-state at the Parliament House twice, the last time making it possible for people to do so around the clock.

As many as 18 community tribute centres were set up across Singapore for mourners to gather to leave messages, flowers and sometimes artwork. Several local artists designed logos and decals to mark the passing of Mr Lee, the most notable of which was a silhouette of Mr Lee's face enclosed within a black ribbon. Stickers bearing this design on cars and windows were commonly seen, and a digital variation was used as a profile picture by many on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Chew, 2015).

Governments worldwide issued messages of tribute and condolence, and spoke of how Mr Lee had been a friend to their nation (*The Straits Times*, 2015c). International media outlets spoke of his part in the building of modern Singapore, although several also highlighted what they saw as an authoritarian streak in his rule (*The Straits Times*, 2015b).

Businesses and business leaders paid tribute as well, and several businesses grey-scaled their logos on the Singapore-facing parts of the social media (Lim J., 2015a).

A special session of Parliament was held to pay tribute to the late Mr Lee. Members of the front bench, back bench, the opposition as well as the NMPs eulogised Mr Lee. There was dispute over the speech by the WP's Mr Low when he referred to the late Mr Lee as "a controversial figure in some people's eyes." Lee's former principal personal secretary, Heng Swee Keat, then Minister for Education, wrote a personal tribute to Mr Lee, noting both the long hours and the hard work that Mr Lee put in for Singapore, by telling the story of Mr Lee's "Red Box" which contained government documents for his attention (Heng, 2015). Notably, prominent opposition figure and former Member of Parliament Chiam See Tong attended Mr Lee's public wake and wrote a letter of condolence in which he said, "No one else had shaped modern Singapore more than Lee Kuan Yew" (Au-Yong, 2015).

Former ISA detainee Teo Soh Lung expressed antipathy during the period of mourning, recalling the suffering she had endured in detention when Lee was the prime minister (Teo, 2105). Playwright and author Alfian Sa'at, while saying that he did not question the

authenticity of emotion expressed during the week of national mourning, questioned whether it was a “propagandistic exercise”, stating that not all Singaporeans viewed Lee Kuan Yew’s legacy identically (Sa’at, 2015). Bertha Henson, a former journalist with *The Straits Times* and founder of the blogsite The Middle Ground, urged Singaporeans to mourn first and then argue about Lee’s legacy later (Henson, 2015).

The Aftermath of Lee’s Passing

The most notable critic of Mr Lee that emerged in the wake of his death was the then 16-year-old Amos Yee who published a rant on video site YouTube.com excoriating the former Prime Minister. In May, Yee was found guilty of one count of making offensive remarks against Christianity and a second offence of circulating obscene imagery for that material. He was given a four-week jail sentence. In the interim, Yee had spent 53 days in remand for flouting his bail conditions and for refusing to cooperate with the court. In October, an appeal against the conviction and jail sentence was dismissed. In doing so, Justice Tay Yong Kwang said to the question of whether Yee had committed a crime in his rant - “This is not freedom of speech, this is a licence to hate, to humiliate others and to totally disregard their feelings or beliefs by using words to inflict unseen wounds” (Chelvan, 2015a).

Following Mr Lee’s passing, some key questions arose relating to the late Lee’s legacy. First, how should the nation commemorate him and the other founders of modern Singapore? At the end of 2015, the government established the Founder’s Memorial Steering Committee to lead the process of public consultation on the matter (Sim W., 2015b).

Second, how should Lee’s home and personal artefacts be managed? The latter were incorporated into an exhibition about his life at the National Museum of Singapore that opened in September (Zaccheus, 2015). The question of the family home proved trickier. In April, Lee’s family explained the late Lee’s wish was that it be demolished after his daughter Dr Lee Wei Ling had moved out or passed on. PM Lee, the elder son, said he recused himself from a decision about it, as he would respect the decision of the government of the day on the matter. In December, PM Lee and his siblings reiterated the hope that their father’s wish be respected and the two sons declared that they would each donate the equivalent of half the value of the Oxley home to the charities that had been listed in the late Lee’s obituary (*Today*, 2015e).

General Election (GE)

Speculation and Run-Up to the GE

Speculation about whether a GE would be held in the Jubilee year began in January. While some news outlets such as Mothership.sg were doubtful about it (Mothership.sg, 2015), others such as The Online Citizen said they would not rule out the possibility that the PAP would ride on the sentiment created by the Jubilee to do so (Lee H., 2015). Some political parties such as the SDP released a policy paper in January in anticipation of an election (Singapore Democrats, 2015).

Speculation intensified when the Elections Department announced that it was updating the electoral register (Tham, 2015a). This was followed by the presentation of the national budget at the end of February that had some commentators wondering if it was an “election budget” filled with goodies to entice the population, although this was not a universal opinion (Chang, 2015c). Speculation picked up steam with the passing of the founding prime minister. The PM then said in late July in a news radio interview that elections would be held in the imminent future but not necessarily when everyone was expecting it to be (Chang & Wong, 2015).

The EBRC Report and Election Candidates

Speculation reached its peak in the week of 13 July, when it was revealed that questions regarding the Electoral Boundary Review Committee (EBRC) would be raised in Parliament. PM Lee revealed that the EBRC had been convened two months prior and that its report was imminent. Despite all the speculation, some parties including the SDP said they were shocked by it (Loh A., 2015) while others such as the National Solidarity Party (NSP) expressed disappointment. Both parties would also call for increased transparency in the EBRC's work.

The EBRC released its report on 24 July. PM Lee had instructed the EBRC to ensure that there would be at least 12 Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) and to reduce the average size of the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) to under five seats. The EBRC's recommendations were that there would be 13 SMCs and reduced the average number of seats in a GRC to 4.75. The number of seats in Parliament was raised from 87 to 89 seats, there was to be 6 four-MP GRCs, 8 five-MP GRCs, and 2 six-MP GRCs. Three new SMCs were established, Bukit Batok, Fengshan and MacPherson; and two SMCs were scrapped, Joo Chiat and Whampoa. The Moulmein-Kallang GRC was dissolved, and two new GRCs were established, Marsiling-Yew Tee and Jalan Besar. Three GRCs were shrunk from being five-member to four-member GRCs (Lee U.-W., 2015).

Notably, there were no changes to the boundaries of the WP-held seats of Hougang SMC, Aljunied GRC and Punggol East SMC, nor were there changes to Potong Pasir SMC, held by prominent opposition parliamentarian Chiam See Tong until his retirement before GE2011. But there were changes to areas where the WP had been best losers in GE2011, and therefore areas that pundits thought the WP was most likely to contest again — Joo Chiat SMC was incorporated into the larger Marine Parade GRC; East Coast GRC was reduced to a four-member GRC from being a five-member GRC, with Fengshan SMC formed by this move. Also of note was the dissolution of the Moulmein-Kallang GRC, of which the then Minister of Transport Liu Tuck Yew, whom voters may have associated with a massive breakdown in the Mass Rapid Transit System that happened in July, was a member.

Several opposition parties criticised the report. NSP felt that the EBRC had failed to set out a “clear-cut and objective criteria” for changes to the electoral boundaries. SDP Secretary-General Chee also said that the electoral boundaries report lacked accountability and that it should have been generated in a transparent manner. WP NCMP Yee Jenn Jong was disappointed about not being able to contest Joo Chiat SMC where he had been one of the best-losing opposition candidates in GE2011 by campaigning there.

On 25 August, President Tony Tan dissolved Parliament and issued the writ of election, designating 1 September as Nomination Day, and 11 of September as Polling Day (Lee M. K., 2015). On Nomination Day, nine political parties and two independent candidates arrived at nine polling stations across the country. For the first time since independence, all seats would be contested, with no walkovers. There were straight fights between PAP candidates and the opposition in all but three single-member constituencies that were multi-cornered contests (Channel NewsAsia, 2015g).

The PAP said it would reveal its full electoral line-up prior to the National Day Rally held on 23 August. In keeping with its own discipline of party renewal, it announced that 22 first-time candidates, in addition to Ong Ye Kung and Desmond Choo, who had previously run for and lost in Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC, respectively. There would be 16 departing PAP MPs (Channel NewsAsia, 2015g; 2015e).

News of Liu's retirement surprised many and elicited “an outpouring of support” from his fellow parliamentarians, even from the WP's Mr Low although the latter couched his statement as a critique of the government, stating that Minister Liu was “hardworking” had much more to contribute and that the problems Liu faced in the transport ministry was an inherited problem. Noting the manner of previous Minister of Transport Raymond Lim's

departure, Low questioned if there was a philosophical split between how the government thought about transport policy versus what the Ministers of Transport did. He asked if there was a need to fundamentally rethink transport policy (Tham, 2015f).

The WP, the second-largest party in Parliament, announced that it would contest 28 seats, the most by any opposition party, and that its incumbent MPs would contest to hold Aljunied GRC, Hougang and Punggol East SMCs. The NSP and SPP would field 12 candidates, SDP would field 11 candidates. The SPP said its Secretary General Mrs Chiam would contest in Potong Pasir SMC which she had been lost by a sliver to the PAP's Sitoh Yih Pin in GE2011. The SDP would see its Secretary General Chee contest an election for the first time in over a decade in the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC.

Outcome of GE2015

The nine day campaign period, not including the cooling off day, had a number of notable themes such as Singapore's development record since independence, local town council management, integrity of potential MPs, effectiveness in Parliament especially WP's record in policy debates.

There was some frustration expressed among the public about what they felt was the campaign's unrelenting focus on the AHPETC town council issues. However, in the latter half of the campaign period, from 4 September, the debates turned towards longer-term policy issues, such as how the government should approach income inequality, minimum wage, immigration, social inclusion and the external economic and geopolitical conditions that might negatively affect Singapore (Tan E. K., 2015).

Social media came to play a prominent role as it did in GE2011, in comparison to the more conventional sources of media such as newspapers and radio. Facebook, alternative media blogs and news websites such as The Online Citizen, Mothership.sg and The Middle Ground were some important platforms for the sharing of opinions, but even more important were messaging apps such as WhatsApp. One such example of the use of the closed-group messaging system was the circulation of the bookies' betting odds close to Polling Day that suggested the PAP could lose as many as 15 to 16 seats (Ho, 2015). The source of this message was not verified, and it is unclear how far or how much impact it had. But to reinforce the idea that the PAP was under some threat, its Chairman, Khaw said on 7 September:

There is no safe seat where victory is assured. It is not a by-election where a PAP government is intact. All 89 seats are being contested. We cannot be sure of a PAP government on Sept 12. There probably will be but there is no guarantee. And we notice some opposition candidates have spoken of wanting to take over the government. (Khalik & Tham, 2015).

The WP dismissed this as a scare tactic to mobilise voters to support the PAP.

On 11 September, polling passed without incident. The Elections Department had announced earlier that it would release sample counts, which would have a margin of error of +/- 4%. When these were revealed, many seats thought to be fiercely contested looked to be comfortable wins for the incumbent PAP, with only Aljunied GRC and Punggol East SMC falling within the margin of error, and suggesting a substantial swing across the island for the PAP (Elections Department, 2015).

By midnight, the sample count had proven to be accurate, correctly indicating the outcomes in all contests, including an indication of a close call in Aljunied GRC. The PAP called for a recount since the margin was within the 2% range, but WP retained the seat with 50.96% or a difference of 2,626 votes after taking into consideration 228 overseas votes that were counted later (Sim R., 2015).

The PAP had won a “landslide victory”, taking 83 out of 89 seats and securing 69.86% of the valid votes, which translated to a swing of 9.72% (Chee K., 2015). It seemed to be an unalloyed success for the PAP and provided a strong endorsement for the personal popularity of the Prime Minister as well as the Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who led their GRCs to comprehensive victories of 78.64% in Ang Mo Kio GRC and 79.29% in Jurong GRC, respectively (*Today*, 2015c).

The WP lost Punggol East SMC to the PAP but retained both Hougang SMC and Aljunied GRC, winning six seats in all. The party also won all three NCMP seats available, giving it nine parliamentarians in the new Parliament, making them the sole opposition party in the House.

The SPP saw its vote share in Potong Pasir SMC dip by 16% which meant that Lina Chiam would not return to the NCMP seat she had in the previous Parliament.

The SDP, despite Secretary-General Chee returning to the fray, was not able to prevail against the PAP team in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC where he contested.

The other parties saw their margins dip even further *vis-à-vis* 2011 if they had contested, and NSP lost its deposit in a three-cornered fight in MacPherson SMC.

The PAP said it was humbled by the outcome but acknowledged that there were factors that were unique to 2015, like the SG50 celebrations and the passing of Lee Kuan Yew that could never be replicated again. The party was conscious of the need to guard against complacency and hubris. PM Lee reiterated that his priority was to press on with leadership succession that would take Singapore to its 100th year of independence successfully (Loh C. K., 2015).

Aftermath of GE2015

At his post-GE conference, PM Lee indicated that he would take about a fortnight to form a new Cabinet (Philomin, 2015). On 28 September, he presented his new Cabinet with younger and newer members given “roles of heavy responsibility” to “test and train them” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015c).

To aid the transition, Tharman Shanmugaratnam was appointed Coordinating Minister (CM) for Economic and Social Policy, and Khaw Boon Wan was appointed Coordinating Minister of Infrastructure. Joining them, Teo Chee Hean became Coordinating Minister for National Security. Both Tharman and Teo would remain Deputy Prime Ministers while vacating their positions as Minister of Finance and Minister of Home Affairs, respectively. Meanwhile, Khaw would move to the Ministry of Transport from the Ministry of National Development (Saad, 2015b). These CMs would mentor the younger leaders.

Two newly elected Members of Parliament, Ng Chee Meng and Ong Ye Kung were made Acting Ministers for Education, with Ng in charge of schools — from preschool to junior college — and Ong in charge of higher education and skills, overseeing the Institute of Technical Education, polytechnics, universities and SkillsFuture.

The former Minister of Education Heng Swee Keat was given the role of Minister of Finance. Two other new MPs were appointed Ministers of State — Chee Hong Tat for the Ministries of Communications and Information, and Health; and Koh Poh Koon for the Ministries of National Development, and Trade and Industry. Amrin Amin, also newly elected, was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs. Grace Fu became Singapore’s first female full minister with a portfolio, as Minister of Culture, Community and Youth.

Former Cabinet Minister S Jayakumar opined that the move to include more coordinating ministers, of which he was one in his time, was a good move that ensured issues that cut across the whole of government would be properly dealt with (Saad, 2015b). Khaw moved to

helm the Ministry of Transport, which urgently needed to address public perception about the fall in service standards.

PM Lee described the new cabinet as a “transition team”, and one that would throw up a team to take over from him and his generation after the next GE.

At the swearing-in of the new office-holders on 1 October, PM Lee reiterated those points and also emphasised that Singaporeans had an integral role in the successful governance of Singapore. He urged citizens to “roll up [their] sleeves, get involved, and come together to make things happen” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015d).

MEDIA ISSUES

The Amos Yee Trial

One of the most prominent debates over freedom of expression in Singapore in 2015 occurred in the wake of the death of Lee Kuan Yew. On 27 March blogger Amos Yee, then 16, uploaded an eight-minute video entitled “Lee Kuan Yew is Finally Dead” on youtube.com. In a speech largely devoted to claiming that Lee was a negative influence for Singapore, Yee compared Lee and Jesus Christ in a way that would later be judged to have been offensive. On 28 March, he would also post an obscene image of the late Lee (Lum & Lee, 2015).

This would eventually cause a furore, with many who had seen the material outraged by it. That resulted in several police reports being filed against Yee. On 29 March, he was arrested by Singapore police (Lim J. 2015a) and charged with making offensive or wounding remarks against Christianity, circulating obscene imagery, as well as a harassment charge relating to comments he had made about Lee Kuan Yew (Sim, 2015). The third charge was “stood down” eventually. Yee was found guilty of the first two charges on 12 May (Sim & Chia, 2015). On 6 July, Yee was sentenced to four weeks in jail, which was backdated to 2 June. As he had been in remand since that date, he was released that same day (Lee A., 2015a). He appealed against the sentence, which failed on 8 October.

The decision to arrest, charge, try and then jail Yee invoked a heated debate, with some civic activists expressing concern about freedom of expression and about levelling the charges without consideration that he was a minor in contrast to the official stance that the arrest was about protecting the public from hate speech. News of Yee’s arrest was carried in numerous major international newspapers, which were focused on Singapore due to the passing of Lee Kuan Yew (Lim J. 2015b). On 22 June the United Nations Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific took the step of issuing a statement urging the Singapore government to, among other things, “consider the best interest of the child in Amos Yee court case” highlighting their concern over Yee’s treatment while he had been remanded during the course of his trial, where Yee’s lawyers claimed Yee’s physical and psychological status was deteriorating (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015).

Community Action Network conducted a protest rally at Hong Lim Park on 5 July where social worker Jolovan Wham said that the treatment of Yee was indicative of “an unprecedented crackdown on freedom of expression in Singapore” and decried the treatment he received given his age (The Community Action Network, 2015; Stuart, 2015). Their petition statement also noted the volume of harsh comments directed at him over the Internet; as well as the slapping of Yee as he was walking to court on 30 April by Neo Gim Huah who was arrested and jailed for three weeks for the act. Neo said he was motivated by the perceived insult to Lee Kuan Yew, and had specifically targeted Yee in a public manner to “teach him a lesson” (Chong E., 2015b). K Shanmugam, then Minister for Law, spoke out against Neo’s actions saying that the matter should be handled through the legal process (Shanmugam, 2015).

The Singaporean government reiterated its the stance that vigorous action had to be taken against hate speech that denigrated or offended the religious beliefs of some of its citizens given its socially diverse context through a statement in July by Singapore's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Foo Chi Hsia in response to an article in *The Economist* about criticising the lack of freedom of speech (*The Straits Times*, 2015d).

In the same month, PM Lee said in an interview with *Time* magazine on the matter: "In our society, which is multiracial and multi-religious, giving offence to another religious or ethnic group, race, language or religion, is always a very serious matter" (Channel NewsAsia, 2015c).

In December 2015 Yee was again questioned by the police after making disparaging remarks about Islam.

The Prime Minister's Defamation Suit Against Roy Ngerng

In November 2014, socio-political blogger Roy Ngerng was found guilty of defaming PM Lee when he published an article on his blog, The Heart Truths, comparing the Singapore government's running of the CPF to the conduct of leaders of the City Harvest Church who were in court defending charges of misappropriating church funds. Going into 2015, the court had to establish the damages due to PM Lee.

In January, Ngerng was ordered to pay the PM \$29,000 to cover the cost of legal fees and other expenses, not including damages. In May, after Mr Ngerng's application to involve a Queen's Counsel in the damages hearing was rejected by the High Court, \$6,000 was added to the sum. Justice Stephen Chong said the case had factors that were unique to Singapore, which would influence the assessment of damages, and thus a Queen's Counsel was inappropriate for the process (Ng, 2015).

The hearing to assess damages was held over three days, from 1 to 3 July where the PM was represented by Senior Counsel Davinder Singh of Drew & Napier, while Ngerng represented himself having previously dismissed his lawyer due to financial concerns.

Ngerng questioned the PM for seven hours on the first day, and the PM's lawyer questioned Ngerng over the remaining days. Ngerng argued that he had always been willing to apologise for any offence caused by his article and suggested that the lawsuit had come about due to his critical stance on the government's handling of Singaporean CPF money. He also argued that since he was not a lawyer, he had not fully understood the gravity of the phrase "criminal misappropriation" used in his offending article.

Mr Singh, representing PM Lee, cited Ngerng's choice of action to "aggravate the offence with follow-up blog posts" after his first apology and argued that Ngerng had offered to pay damages to "get away on the cheap". Ngerng's actions were seen as a "cynical, calculated" attempt to raise his own profile (Malinda, 2015a; Malinda & Mokhtar, 2015).

The case came to a close on 17 December when the Supreme Court of Singapore ordered Ngerng to pay damages amounting to \$150,000. Justice Lee Siu Kin, in his judgement, noted the damages awarded for similar cases of defamation of the prime minister would be in excess of \$300,000. The Court had taken Ngerng's comparatively lower social standing than the defendants in the other cases into account in establishing the sum. Justice Lee said that while Ngerng had apologised, he was "not contrite" and that his accusation "was a grave defamation that a fair-minded person would react with indignation" (Chelvan, 2015b).

PM Lee's press secretary reported that the PM accepted the judgement and the award. Ngerng said he wanted to put the case behind him and move on with his life.

The response to this phase of the trial seemed more muted compared to what emerged in the previous year. That said, a consistent theme emerging from outside parties was the concern over the PM's use of the defamation law. Just before the damages hearing began in July, Maruah, a human rights non-government organisation published a statement objecting to the use of the defamation law and urged PM Lee to address the concerns raised by Ngerng through other methods such as publishing a press statement or refuting him on a relevant website (Maruah, 2015). The International Commission of Jurist, having already written in support of Ngerng just before the damages award, reiterated its support for him, expressing concern that the trial and award constituted a "major blow for freedom of expression in the country" (International Commission of Jurist, 2015). Author and social commentator Catherine Lim urged the PM to consider being "magnanimous" in the spirit of his highly successful concluded election campaign (Lim C., 2015).

The Closure of therealsingapore.com

On the 6 February 2015, Robin Yang Kai Heng and Ai Takagi, editors of sociopolitical news website, therealsingapore.com (TRS), were arrested under the Sedition Act for allegedly posting an insensitive and fabricated article on the website suggesting that a Filipino family was responsible for an incident at the annual Thaipusam Festival in February (*Today*, 2015a).

The pair were eventually charged with seven counts of sedition and one charge of failing to produce documents to a police officer. The articles were published between October 2013 and March 2014 and judged to have promoted ill will and hostility among different groups of people in Singapore (Chong E., 2015a).

In May the TRS website and social media platforms were discontinued on the orders of the Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA) that stated TRS had maintained an editorial strategy of "deceiving readers and doctoring articles" to increase site traffic and boost advertising revenue (Foo, 2015). It further stated that initially the site was run overseas but as operations had moved to Singapore, TRS was now under Singaporean jurisdiction (Chong E., 2015c).

Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said that while the government had never shut down a site before, it was doing so in this case "very carefully". He said that the TRS editors had crossed a line and that the move was to "preserve the racial and religious harmony that we have in Singapore", as well as to signal how media outlets should behave in the Singaporean market (Khew, 2015).

The case is ongoing as of the end of 2015.

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