

The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2019

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a review of key policy and political developments in Singapore in 2019. The information in this document is correct as of January 2, 2020.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) reported that Singapore's economy grew by 0.7 per cent in 2019 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020). The overall unemployment rate for 2019 was 2.3 per cent while resident unemployment was 3.2 per cent. To compare, in 2018, the overall unemployment rate was 2.1 per cent, while the resident unemployment rate was 2.9 per cent (Ministry of Manpower, 2020a).

Nominal median gross monthly income from work of full-time employed residents (including employers' Central Provident Fund contributions) in 2019 was S\$4,563, up from S\$4,437 in 2018 (Ministry of Manpower, 2020b). Singapore's Gini coefficients in 2019, a measure of income inequality, were 0.452 before accounting for government taxes and transfers, and 0.398 after accounting for government taxes and transfers — the lowest since 2001. Singapore's Gini coefficients in 2018 were 0.458 and 0.403, respectively (Department of Statistics, 2019).

Singapore's citizen population grew by 0.8 per cent to reach 3.5 million in 2019, while the non-resident population grew by 2 per cent to reach 1.68 million. Singapore's total population was 5.7 million (Strategy Group, 2019).

POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Bicentennial Commemorations

The year 2019 marked the bicentennial of modern Singapore's establishment by Stamford Raffles of the East India Company in 1819. Launching the year-long commemorations on January 28, the day recorded for Raffles' landing, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong stressed the importance of not only understanding Singapore's colonial history but also acknowledging the island's pre-colonial past stretching to the 14th century. Singapore's post-independence successes stemmed from crucial turning points in its history, most notably Britain's arrival and development of a trading port, PM Lee acknowledged. He urged Singaporeans to use the commemoration to reflect on how the country could move forward together (Sim F., 2019a).

The Singapore Bicentennial Office (SBO) in the Prime Minister's Office organised a series of exhibitions, art displays and heritage-themed activities; the flagship of which was *From Singapore to Singaporean: The Bicentennial Experience*, an audio-visual exhibition held at Fort Canning Park. Launched by President Halimah Yacob on May 30, the show consisted of an hour-long indoor cinematic experience called *Time Traveller* and an outdoor exploratory trail called *Pathfinder* (Zaccheus, 2019). Originally slated to run until September 15, the show's run was extended a further three months due to overwhelming demand (TODAY, 2019a) and hosted over 760,000 visitors (95 per cent being Singaporeans) by the time it closed on 31 December (Goh, 2020).

These state-led commemorations sparked debate over how Singapore should handle its colonial past, with some activists and experts highlighting the negative aspects of colonial rule, such as the dispossession of the indigenous Malays. These critics questioned whether

Stamford Raffles should continue to be positively venerated in Singapore society (Boh, 2019). In response, the SBO stressed that its policy was to present a commemoration of the bicentennial and not a celebration; yet, it could not be denied that “[t]he year 1819 is also being recognised as a turning point in a 700-year history, which had set Singapore on “a new trajectory towards the modern nation we are today” (Boh, 2019).

Budget 2019

On February 18, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat proposed the national budget for financial year (FY) 2019. He outlined three major themes it addressed: the Bicentennial; global trade friction and geopolitical uncertainty; and the task of building a strong, united Singapore based on openness, multiculturalism and self-determination (Heng, 2019). The Budget was passed on February 28, with all members of Parliament (MPs) voting in favour of it (Lim A., 2019a).

Bicentennial Bonus

To commemorate the anniversary, a one-off Bicentennial Bonus was announced. The S\$1.1 billion package consisted of one-off GST Voucher cash payouts, Edusave and Post-Secondary Education Account top-ups, tax rebates, additional top-ups for lower-income workers receiving Workfare Income Supplement payments, and CPF top-ups for older Singaporeans with lower balances (Rahimah, 2019). Minister Heng also unveiled the Bicentennial Community Fund to provide dollar-to-dollar matching for donations to Institutions of a Public Character (IPCs) “to encourage more Singaporeans, including younger Singaporeans, to embrace the spirit of giving back” (Rahimah, 2019).

Merdeka Generation Package

Following PM Lee’s announcement of the Merdeka Generation Package (MGP) of healthcare subsidies at the National Day Rally Speech in 2018, Minister Heng unveiled more details of this in his Budget speech. A total of S\$6.1 billion would be set aside as “a gesture of our nation’s gratitude” to those born between January 1950 and December 1959 (Lai, 2019a). The package would include Medisave top-ups, special Community Health Assist Scheme (CHAS) subsidies for common illnesses, an extra 25 per cent subsidy at polyclinics and specialist outpatient clinics and lifetime subsidies for their MediShield Life premiums (Ng H. , 2019a).

Reduction of foreign worker quota in services sector

Mr Heng announced that the dependency ratio ceiling (DRC) which sets the maximum number of foreign workers a company can hire for every full-time local employee they have, would be lowered from 40 per cent to 38 per cent on January 1, 2020, and to 35 per cent in January 2021. This would apply to the services sector only to better manage manpower growth in it. To help companies adjust, the government extended the Enterprise Development Grant, which provides funding for growth and transformation projects, till March 31, 2023. It also expanded the scope of the productivity solutions grant and deferred foreign worker levy increases for the marine shipyard and process sectors for another year (Ng H. , 2019a)

Enhanced subsidies and public assistance

In addition to the MGP, Mr Heng announced additional healthcare subsidies for the general population. Holders of orange CHAS cards who previously had access to subsidised care only

for chronic conditions would now also enjoy subsidies for common illnesses at the cost of an extra \$200 million. Another \$5.1 billion would go into a Long-Term Care Support Fund to provide CareShield Life premium subsidies and ElderFund support. Public assistance payouts to those permanently unable to work and with little family support were also increased. Additional service and conservancy charge rebates would be made available to 900,000 households at the cost of \$132 million and the Public Transport Fund received a \$10 million boost to support lower-income Singaporeans. Workers receiving Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) would see their maximum annual payouts increase by up to \$400 from January 2020. The qualifying income cap for Workfare was raised to \$2,300 per month, up from \$2,000 (Ng H. , 2019a).

Tightening of GST Import Relief & alcohol allowance

The government announced that GST relief for travellers who spend 48 hours or more overseas would be reduced from \$600 to \$500 from the day after the Budget was announced. For those spending less than 48 hours overseas, the GST relief would be reduced from \$150 to \$100. The duty free alcohol allowance would be cut from three to two litres from April 1 that year, with the limit for spirits remaining at one litre (Ng H. , 2019a).

Reactions

The MGP received a mostly positive public response because the additional subsidies provided greater assurance people could meet the cost of their healthcare needs. Those with chronic conditions welcomed the less expensive visits to the doctor, though some were concerned that the subsidies would not suffice. People also welcomed the Bicentennial Bonus, although a few preferred the benefits to be in cash than additional CPF top-ups. Women's advocacy group Aware welcomed the Budget but criticised what it saw as a lack of urgency in tackling Singapore's ageing population and the associated caregiving needs. "Benefits were restricted to one generation and were mostly one-off. We would have liked to see a more comprehensive package for individuals entering their silver years," it stated (Ng H. , 2019a).

Workers' Party (WP) Chief Pritam Singh criticised the generation-specific nature of the MGP and the Pioneer Generation Package (PGP). Instead, he urged the government to create a comprehensive healthcare package that would be applicable to all Singaporeans from age 60 (Lim A., 2019b). He added, "There are also quarters who conclude that it is pungently timed with the election cycle, giving off the odour of an unfair advantage aimed at the electoral prospects of the People's Action Party" (Sim F., 2019b).

Responding to Mr Singh, Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education Chee Hong Tat denied that the PGP and MGP were intended to sweeten the ground for election purposes. Pointing out that the packages were funded by the current term of government, Mr Chee said that this meant the government had to ensure that there were sufficient surpluses to fund them before introducing the packages. "This is what a responsible government needs to do, to ensure that our policies and programmes are financially sustainable for the current and future generations," he said (Sim F., 2019b).

Committee of Supply Debates

Foreign affairs

Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan said Singapore would continue to promote a rules-based international order, stating that “[w]ithout it, small countries will have very little chance of survival.” He noted that the international trading system was facing strong pressure from domestic nationalist forces, but that Singapore would continue to actively promote free trade agreements and support the World Trade Organisation’s work (Chia, 2019).

Dr Balakrishnan also touched on Singapore’s bilateral ties with key countries. While acknowledging that Singapore would come under intense pressure to choose sides as great powers engaged in strategic rivalry, he reiterated that Singapore would continue to take a position of neutrality. With ties with Malaysia under pressure from territorial disputes, the minister said Singapore was committed to resolving them in “an amicable and constructive manner”, and in line with bilateral agreements and international law (Chia, 2019).

Defence

Singapore remained committed to making “significant and steady investments” in defence to maintain national security, stated Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen. Announcing that Singapore was going to put in an initial request to acquire four F-35 stealth fighter jets from the United States (US), he added that these would eventually replace the current F-16 fleet. The navy would also be receiving new assets, with the upcoming German-built Invincible-class submarines and the new multi-role combat vessels replacing the current missile corvettes from 2025 (Matthew, 2019a).

The SAF’s infrastructure would also be enhanced with the construction of two key facilities. The first, SAFTI City, was announced in 2017 and is on schedule to be completed by 2023. The second — the new NS Hub, to be located near Cashew MRT station — would consolidate the Central Manpower Base, medical screening and fitness assessment facilities, and an e-Mart for purchasing equipment (Matthew, 2019a).

Housing

Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong announced three key policy changes regarding housing. First, new Build-To-Order projects would be made public six months before going on sale, up from the current three months, with ballot times halved to three weeks. Mr Wong said this would improve the home-buying process. Second, he announced that a grant to help lower-income families buy bigger homes would be broadened in scope to assist more families. Finally, he announced that the CPF rules would be made more flexible to help elderly owners buy older flats more easily to right-size their homes in their silver years (Au-Yong, 2019a).

Education

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung made one of the most significant announcements at the Committee of Supply debates, stating that streaming would be abolished in secondary schools and replaced with subject-based banding gradually from 2020. Coining it “one secondary education, many subject bands,” he used an analogy to describe this change: “We will no

longer have fishes swimming down three separate streams, but one broad river, with each fish negotiating its own journey.” Students would receive a common secondary school education certificate, merging the Express, Normal Academic and Normal Technical streams (Ong, 2019).

Mr Ong also announced that the Ministry of Education (MOE) would be rebuilding the campuses of Temasek, Jurong Pioneer and Anderson Serangoon Junior Colleges (JCs) and upgrading that of Yishun Innova JC. It would be the first phase of a Rejuvenation Programme that would eventually see the upgrading of the remaining older JCs too (Ong, 2019).

National Day Rally 2019

In his speech on August 18, PM Lee announced new policies in three key domains: Climate change, older workers, and education.

Climate change

PM Lee announced that Singapore would adopt a three-pronged approach to tackling climate change: understand the issue, take measures to mitigate it, and adapt to it (Teh, 2019a). He cited the role played by the Centre for Climate Research Singapore (CCRS), where scientists used computer modelling to research changing climate patterns. To reduce greenhouse gas emissions, he cited Singapore’s commitments under the Paris climate agreement to cap carbon dioxide emissions by 2030. Citing a past policy reform, one of the ways to do so was through the carbon tax introduced in 2018 on industrial facilities which was expected to help reduce emissions by 36 per cent from 2005 levels by 2030 (Teh, 2019a).

Given that Singapore is a low-lying island state with 30 per cent of land less than 5 metres above the mean sea level, rising sea levels were an existential threat, the PM stated. To tackle this problem, he announced plans to spend S\$100 billion over the next 100 years to protect Singapore’s infrastructure against rising seas (Chang, 2019a). Some of the engineering works being evaluated would include empoldering, a land reclamation technique being tested on offshore islands along the East Coast. The islands could then be dammed up to create a freshwater reservoir to improve Singapore’s water resilience (Tan A., 2019).

Experts welcomed PM Lee’s proposals but cautioned that 100 years may be too long a timeframe if sea levels rise faster than current projections. Professor Benjamin Horton, the chair of the Asian School of the Environment at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), emphasised that “science should come first, and then responsible, cost-effective adaptation can follow” (Horton, 2019). He pointed out that the Dutch, who use polders and dykes extensively, perfected the technique when sea levels were stable, and that expensive modifications will be needed in the future to protect against rising water levels (Horton, 2019).

Climate activists also chimed in on the debate, urging the government to implement more preventive measures rather than adaptive ones. The Singapore Climate Rally, a non-profit organisation, organised a rally at the Speakers’ Corner on September 21 that coincided with the global youth movement against climate change spearheaded by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg (Wong, 2019). Attracting 1,700 participants, the rally called for carbon taxes to be increased and for companies to divest from the fossil fuel industry (Wong, 2019).

Older workers

PM Lee also announced measures to improve the welfare of older workers as the life expectancy of Singaporeans was projected to rise to 85 years old. The key reforms were, first, to gradually raise the retirement and re-employment ages from 62 to 65 and 67 to 70 by 2030 respectively; and second, to raise CPF contribution rates for workers aged 55 to 70 from 2021 until those aged 60 and below enjoy full CPF rates, with rates tapering down after 60 and levelling off after 70. This would help older workers generate greater retirement savings.

The move, to be phased in over the next 10 years, were part of recommendations by a tripartite workgroup that were accepted by the government. PAP labour MP Heng Chee How lauded the move for offering workers the choice to work longer, while the Singapore Business Federation welcomed the plan to gradually raise contribution rates, noting the impact on business costs and competitiveness (Seow, 2019).

Education

To ensure that succeeding generations of Singaporeans enjoyed social mobility through education, PM Lee announced that preschool education would be made more affordable, with the qualifying household income ceiling for government subsidies raised from \$7,000 to \$12,000, benefiting 30,000 more families. Also, the proportion of government-supported preschool places would be raised from 50 per cent to 80 per cent, to match access to public housing. He said that his government would also lower university fees at the Singapore Institute of Technology and the Singapore University of Social Sciences, and raise bursaries to various institutes of higher learning. Fees at Singapore's medical schools would also be capped at \$5,000 per year for lower-income students (Cheng, 2019a).

Developments in Education

Beyond the abolition of secondary school streaming announced during the Committee of Supply, the Ministry of Education also unveiled details in July about implementing the new PSLE scoring system from 2021. The issue of sexual harassment in tertiary campuses received much scrutiny after a student spoke out about inadequate support she received in the aftermath of an incident.

New PSLE scoring system

MOE had announced in 2016 that the existing T-score system used for PSLE grading would be replaced from 2021 with eight scoring bands known as Achievement Levels. This was intended to reduce fine differentiation of students, the stress of this high-stakes examination, and encourage a shift away from excessive emphasis on exam scores towards holistic development (Teng, 2016). Then Acting Minister for Education (Schools) Ng Chee Meng explained that given the significant changes, MOE would spend the next few years testing out the systems and help parents familiarise themselves with the reforms (Teng, 2016).

In July 2019, MOE announced that Primary Five students would be graded under the new scoring system from 2020 and released the details of it. This would allow students to get used to the new system before taking their PSLE in 2021 (Davie, 2019). Details on the scoring of Foundation-level subjects taken by weaker students, and eligibility criteria for Higher Mother

Tongue taken by higher ability students were also announced. MOE added that it would start engaging students and parents from Primary Four on making decisions about PSLE subject choices. Some parents expressed concerns about the Foundation-level subjects being pegged so low, but appreciated MOE's efforts to familiarise parents and students about the new processes early (Davie, 2019).

Sexual harassment on campuses

In April, sexual harassment on university campuses became the subject of intense public discussion after a student from the National University of Singapore (NUS) took to social media to express her grievances regarding how an incident she was involved in had been managed.

Monica Baey, a 23-year-old third-year communications and new media undergraduate, revealed in a series of Instagram stories that she was showering in the Eusoff Hall student residence when she noticed a phone being held underneath the door (Ng H. , 2019b).

When she reported the perpetrator, a fellow NUS student named Nicholas Lim, the university suspended the man for one semester, barred him from campus housing, and ordered him to undergo counselling and write Ms Baey a letter of apology (CNA, 2019a). The police later confirmed that the perpetrator was also issued with a 12-month conditional warning as he had been "assessed to have high likelihood of rehabilitation" (CNA, 2019b). They denied allegations that he was afforded leniency because his parents were influential, adding that such factors were irrelevant considerations (CNA, 2019b).

In response to Ms Baey's criticism of various aspects of the university's disciplinary actions against the perpetrator, NUS announced that it would convene a committee to review its disciplinary and support frameworks. It added that the committee would study the approaches taken by other international institutions and solicit views from various stakeholders (CNA, 2019c). NUS President Tan Eng Chye apologised to NUS alumni in a letter for the way the case had been handled. "We are sorry that she had to surface her concerns on social media for the University to take notice. We fell short in providing her support from the start, and we apologise. We hope to set things right," he wrote (CNA, 2019a).

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung weighed in to describe the penalties meted out by NUS as "manifestly inadequate". In a Facebook post, he revealed that he had asked the other universities to review their disciplinary frameworks for similar offences, adding that "from here on, for offences that affect the safety of students on campus, we have to take a tough stand, and send a strong signal to everyone" (CNA, 2019d).

On April 25, NUS held a campus townhall where students questioned university management on its handling of the case. Ms Baey, who was on exchange in Taiwan, flew back to attend the meeting. She described the lack of support from NUS after she reported the incident, as well as the lack of communication through the disciplinary process (Teng, 2019). She appealed for tougher disciplinary measures against perpetrators and for a dedicated office to deal with the reporting and processing of sexual assault cases. Other students also spoke up about their own experiences. In response, NUS Vice-Provost (Student Life) Florence Ling

apologised for the university's inadequate response and pledged that the review committee "will leave no stone unturned" in its process (Teng, 2019).

The review committee subsequently released its report on June 10, spanning three key areas: sanctions for offenders, the involvement of victims in the disciplinary process; and, measures to improve support for victims and campus safety. The committee solicited feedback through 15 engagement sessions, an independent online survey of students, as well as from external legal experts (Ang, 2019). Among the recommendations were minimum one-year suspensions for serious offences, immediate expulsion for aggravated offences and keeping victims informed of the disciplinary process and outcome. NUS accepted the recommendations in full and said it would work to implement the new measures (Ang, 2019).

Housing Reforms

Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong had announced during the Committee of Supply that the ministry would unveil changes to CPF rules on purchasing older flats. The ministry subsequently released details of the changes in May, which would allow older couples to draw more from their CPF savings and get a larger HDB loan for older resale flats while restricting younger buyers from the same (Neo, 2019). HDB flats must have at least 20 years left on their leases (down from a minimum of 30 years) in order for CPF monies to be used for the purchase and older Singaporeans must have property leases that cover them until the age of 95 before they can withdraw excess CPF savings above the Basic Retirement Sum (Neo, 2019).

The measures came amidst continuing public concern over HDB flat leases expiring at the end of 99 years, potentially rendering residents' investments without value. In 2018's National Day Rally, PM Lee had announced several measures for older precincts, such as the new Home Improvement Programme II for ageing units where leases are at the 60- to 70-year mark, and the Voluntary Early Redevelopment Scheme, which would be rolled out in two decades' time (Lim J., 2019a). Property sales data subsequently revealed that sales of older flats in May and June rose to 44.9 per cent of total resale transactions, compared to 40.6 per cent during the same period in 2018 (Lim J., 2019a).

Maintaining Singapore's Cohesion

A few notable controversies emerged during the year regarding race and religious issues in Singapore. They led to widespread public debate and prompted the government to clarify and reaffirm Singapore's commitment to protecting racial and religious harmony in Singapore.

Brownface advertisement and Preeti's rap video controversy

In July, an advertisement for e-payments website epay.sg was released featuring Mediacorp celebrity Dennis Chew as four characters: A Chinese man, a Chinese woman, a Malay woman in a tudung, and an Indian man with darkened skin and a wig. The advertisement subsequently came under fire for using brownface to darken an ethnic Chinese actor's skin tone to play an Indian character instead of using an Indian actor for the role (Lee, 2019). The characters were removed from the advertisement soon after and the creative agency involved released a statement apologising "for any hurt that was unintentionally caused". It added that Dennis

Chew “appears as characters from different walks of life in Singapore, bringing home the point that everyone can e-pay” (Lee, 2019).

Shortly after, social media celebrity Preeti Nair, who goes by the moniker Preetipls, and her brother Subhas Nair, released a rap video titled “K Muthusamy”. In the video, the siblings rapped about racial stereotypes faced by minority communities in Singapore and criticised the Chinese with profanities (CNA, 2019e). The video garnered more than 40,000 views on Facebook and was also uploaded on Youtube and Instagram. The police subsequently announced that they were investigating a report lodged against the video for offensive content (CNA, 2019e). The video was then taken down by the siblings after the Infocomm Media Development Authority issued an order.

Government and religious leaders stepped in to address the growing controversy, with Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam stating, “when you use four-letter words, vulgar language, attack another race, put it out in public, we have to draw the line and say [it is] not acceptable” (Co, 2019). Dr Janil Puthuchery, Chairman of OnePeople.sg, said that he found both the brownface advertisement and the rap video “unacceptable”. Religious leaders opined that minority groups should report offensive content to the authorities rather than take matters into their own hands (Co, 2019).

However, social media reaction was divided on the government’s actions, with people questioning whether officials were empathising enough with minority groups who had long raised complaints about institutional racism (Jaipragas, 2019a). A few commentators characterised the video as an expression of such concerns, rather than an attack on the Chinese. The WP’s Pritam Singh asked how citizens could raise sensitive racial issues without fear of recrimination, and how Singapore should deal with racism faced by its minorities (Jaipragas, 2019a).

On August 2, the Nair siblings released what they characterised as an apology, but which contained almost the exact same phrasing as the earlier statement by the brownface ad’s creative agency and Mediacorp (Sim D. , 2019a). Fans praised their statement as a “witty clap back” but the authorities were unamused, criticising it as a “mock, insincere apology”. The Nair siblings subsequently issued a new apology the next day, stating “We unconditionally apologise for the tone, aggression, vulgarities and gestures used in the K. Muthusamy music video.” They added that their video was only intended to spark a conversation on the portrayal of minority races in Singapore (Ng H. , 2019c).

Police concluded their investigations into the video in mid-August, issuing the Nair siblings 24-month conditional warnings under Section 298A(a) of the Penal Code, Chapter 224, which criminalises promoting enmity between different groups on the grounds of race or religion, and committing acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony (SCMP, 2019a). The police also confirmed they would not be taking further action against the brownface advertisement, with the IMDA issuing a stern reminder to the parties involved in it on the importance of racial and religious sensitivities (Ng H. , 2019d).

The Ramesh Erramalli controversy

In early October, a fresh racially-tinged controversy erupted over the actions of a condominium resident. Ramesh Erramalli, a 44-year-old resident at Eight Riversuites, was recorded berating a security guard who tried to enforce the condominium management's policy of imposing a \$10 fee on visitors who parked their cars there after 11pm (TODAY, 2019b).

The video went viral online, with speculation over whether Ramesh was a new citizen and how he obtained his citizenship. The Ministry of Home Affairs clarified that he had become a citizen on the sponsorship of his wife, under the Family Ties scheme. More than 31,000 signatures were collected for an online petition urging Ramesh's employer, JP Morgan, to dismiss him (TODAY, 2019b). Ramesh also filed a police report alleging that his personal information had been shared online, causing harassment (Lim J., 2019b).

In a subsequent meeting at the condominium among the parties involved in the incident, Ramesh apologised to the security guard in the presence of leaders from the Association of Certified Security Agencies. One of them, Gary Haris, wrote on Facebook that the security guard had "forgiven Mr Erramalli wholeheartedly and thanked him for apologising in person", and also urged the public to "forgive Mr Erramalli and forget this unfortunate incident" (Tan T. M., 2019).

The incident sparked public debate on the behaviour of foreigners in Singapore reflecting some level of antipathy against Singapore's immigrants. Online comment soon centred on the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) between India and Singapore which critics alleged gave Indian nationals unfair access to work in Singapore (Kok, 2019). In November, activist Gilbert Goh organised a protest at Speakers' Corner against CECA, which attracted hundreds of demonstrators. Even though Ramesh was a Singapore citizen, Goh characterised him as a "new citizen" who did not "integrate well" (Kok, 2019).

Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing strongly rejected the perception of CECA affording Indian nationals unfair access to Singapore's labour market. He clarified that Indian nationals looking to work here would need to meet the Ministry of Manpower's criteria and that CECA did not offer a privileged path to Singapore citizenship (CNA, 2019f).

Ban on Swedish metal band Watain

In March, IMDA abruptly cancelled the debut concert of Swedish metal band Watain despite approving the event earlier with a mature rating. MHA stated that it had provided an assessment on the day of the concert that the band's history of denigrating religions and promoting violence posed a risk to Singapore's social harmony (Eddino, 2019a). The decision came as an online petition gathered 15,000 signatures against Watain's concert as something that did not "represent the culture which we want in our youths" (Eddino, 2019b).

Watain band member Erik Danielsson slammed the ban as "old fashioned retardation", and the band still turned up at the venue to meet fans and sign autographs. Fans expressed their disappointment at the decision, arguing that metal music was being unfairly maligned.

Law and Home Affairs Minister Shanmugam later stated that the decision to ban the concert was in response to feedback from Christians that the band's work was religiously offensive

(CNA, 2019g). Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Sun Xueling stressed that the government was not making “a value judgement” on the genre of music, but that it had to take an even-handed approach when looking at the concerns of different racial and religious groups. She conceded that the processes could be reviewed to minimise disruption to arts practitioners and dispel the notion that the authorities made decisions after being subjected to pressure from religious groups (CNA, 2019g).

Cybersecurity

On January 28, the Ministry of Health (MOH) announced that the personal details of 14,200 people with HIV had been stolen and leaked online by an American who had lived and worked in Singapore previously.

Mikhy Farrera-Brochez, who had been jailed in 2017 for fraud and drug-related offences, and had been found to have lied to MOM about his HIV status, had been deported after serving his 28-month sentence (Chang, 2019b). Farrera-Brochez had used his partner’s blood to pass HIV tests and had been working as a polytechnic lecturer before his conviction in 2017 (Chang, 2019b). His partner was Ler Teck Siang, a Singaporean doctor who had access to Singapore’s HIV registry as part of his job as head of MOH’s National Public Health Unit. It was later learnt that Farrera-Brochez had accessed Ler’s records of HIV patients when he was in Singapore, and shared these subsequently.

The leaked records contained each person’s name, identification number, phone number, address, HIV test results and other medical information. The information of a further 2,400 people identified through contact tracing was also included. MOH notified those whose details had been leaked and set up a hotline to answer any queries about the incident. The police warned anyone who came across the data online to not share it and to contact the authorities immediately (Chang, 2019b).

News of the leak sent shockwaves through the community of people living with HIV. Many expressed fears that disclosure of their status would lead to family ostracism and workplace discrimination. Advocacy group Action for Aids condemned the leak and urged the public to report any such data found online. It also called for solidarity among those who had been affected by HIV (Teh, 2019b).

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong told Parliament in mid-February that MOH had become aware in April 2016 that Farrera-Brochez had confidential information from the HIV registry. The police then raided and seized all relevant materials such as data storage devices from his home, including deleting copies of the list he had sent to his mother (*The Straits Times*, 2019). With questions arising on why MOH waited nearly three years to reveal the leak, Mr Gan argued that it was a “judgment call”. Given there was no evidence of a public leak at that time in 2016, MOH decided that making the matter public would “not serve the interests of the affected individuals, when weighed against the inevitable anxiety and distress they would experience” (*The Straits Times*, 2019).

Public disquiet over the incident was significant as it was the latest in a series of lapses related to the Health Ministry. A Hepatitis C outbreak at the Singapore General Hospital in 2015 killed seven people, while a data breach at SingHealth in 2018 led to the theft of 1.5 million patients’ personal information, including that of PM Lee (Pang, 2019). Political observer Associate

Professor Eugene Tan said that the breach had “dented public confidence” in governance systems, adding that Singaporeans expected and demanded a high level of competency from the government (Pang, 2019).

Farrera-Brochez was later arrested by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and charged in a Kentucky federal court with unlawful possession of stolen information as well as for the intent to extort the Singapore government into releasing his partner Ler by threatening to release the data (Yong C., 2019a). He was found guilty of all three charges after a trial that lasted a day and a half, and sentenced to two years in jail in September. He was ordered to surrender his electronic devices and was told he would be on supervised release for three years after his sentence was served to ensure he did not leak the data further (Yong C., 2019b). A civil suit by MOH to compel Farrera-Brochez to delete and return the stolen data is ongoing (Yong C., 2019a).

The Enactment of POFMA to Combat Online Falsehoods

The government tabled the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill (with the law known as POFMA) on April 1. Those who spread online falsehoods with a malicious intent to harm public interest could face jail terms of up to 10 years. Individuals who failed to put up corrections as required under the law and online platforms that which refuse to display corrections or remove postings would also face heavy financial penalties (Tham Y.-C., 2019a).¹

The Bill when passed gives Ministers the sole power to order correction or removal of online content, a feature that came under heavy criticism from opposition MPs and civil society. WP’s Pritam Singh said his party would oppose the Bill, arguing that ministers should not be the initial decision-maker on what is defined as a falsehood (Sim F., 2019c). WP MP Low Thia Khiang likened it to a match where the minister is “both player and referee”. The WP instead recommended that a neutral entity such as the judiciary be tasked to review applications from the government speedily.

Civil society groups (28 of them) also released a joint statement expressing concern at what they viewed as “excessive discretionary powers of censorship.” They questioned the Bill’s provision that the “public interest” requirement be satisfied if the Minister has that opinion, as well as the Minister’s power to unilaterally exempt anyone from the Bill’s provisions. The statement called for the Bill to be withdrawn and for more consultations on reducing its “overbroad” measures (Joint statement regarding the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill, 2019).

Responding to these concerns, Home Affairs Minister Shanmugam said that the Bill was designed specifically to deal with online falsehoods rather than the broad areas under existing laws such as the Broadcasting Act (Kwang, 2019a). He also assured Singaporeans that the appeals process against the Ministers’ decisions would be “fast and relatively inexpensive” and that the judiciary will be the final arbiter in the process (Lai, 2019b). Parliament passed

¹ Under the bill, there were two conditions to be met before action could be taken: there must be a false statement of fact; and it must be in the public interest for the government to act.

the Bill on May 9, with the WP MPs voting against it and three Nominated MPs abstaining (Kwang, 2019b).

POFMA took effect on October 2 and was invoked for the first time a month later when Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat issued a correction direction to Progress Singapore Party Member Brad Bowyer. The latter had made a Facebook post about investments by GIC, Temasek and other government-linked companies, which the government alleged implied that it influenced their commercial decisions (Tham Y.-C., 2019b). Mr Bowyer did not challenge the order and put up the correction notice as required.

Soon after, POFMA was again invoked against the States Times Review (STR) website for falsely alleging that a “whistleblower who exposed a PAP candidate’s Christian affiliations” had been arrested and that the owner of the Facebook page NUSSU-NUS Students United was under investigation (CNA, 2019h). As STR editor Alex Tan refused to accept the correction direction, Facebook was issued with a directive to append the correction notice to the original post. It complied with a notice that read “Facebook is legally required to tell you that the Singapore Government says this post has false information” (Tan T. W., 2019a).

Two successive correction directions were issued in December — one to the Singapore Democratic Party for alleged falsehoods about employment statistics, and the second to opposition politician Lim Tean for alleged false statements about MOE’s spending on local and foreign students (Jaipragas & Sim, 2019).

Critics questioned the government’s successive use of POFMA against opposition politicians, and whether ministers could be trusted to act purely in the public interest when wielding its power. The government rebutted such arguments by stating that the correction directions were not takedown notices, and that readers still had the ability to read both sides and make up their minds (Jaipragas & Sim, 2019)

Legal Developments

The government updated the Penal Code and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act to take into account emerging crimes, better protect victims and respond quickly to threats. There were also renewed legal challenges to Section 377A, which criminalises male same-sex relations.

Reforms to the Penal Code

In February, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Amrin Amin introduced the Criminal Law Reform Bill in Parliament. Major changes included specific provisions for voyeurism, sexual exposure and child abuse material, as well as the long-awaited repeal of marital rape immunity and the decriminalisation of attempted suicide.

Drawing on recommendations from the Penal Code Review Committee in 2018, the Bill stipulated that those who commit crimes against vulnerable victims, such as disabled people, would receive twice the maximum punishment for similar crimes against others, up from one and a half times (Tan T. W., 2019b). Exploitative sexual relationships, such as the predatory conduct of adults towards minors, and the use of child sex dolls, were also criminalised. For

the first time, the definitions of rape and sexual assault were made more gender-neutral to recognise men as victims of rape and sexual assault by women (Tan T. W., 2019c).

After years of prolonged activism, the government finally moved to repeal immunity for marital rape as part of the Penal Code review. Although some parties expressed concern about this potentially leading to an increase in false allegations of rape, the proposed repeal drew strong support from the religious, legal and social sectors (Kwang, 2019c). Some lawyers did point out that proving lack of consent might be a challenge given the nature of intimate relationships. Nevertheless, Corinna Lim, Executive Director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) had earlier said, “Timely medical examination, witness testimony, eyewitnesses before or after the assault, secondary witnesses and possible admission by perpetrator on texts can all help to secure conviction like any other sexual assault case” (Aqil, 2018).

Experts and mental health advocates welcomed the move to decriminalise attempted suicide, stressing that the reform was unlikely to encourage more people to take their own lives. Without the fear of prosecution, more people with suicidal tendencies would be willing to seek help, according to Samaritans of Singapore, a suicide prevention group (Liu, 2019). Advocates also called for a greater effort to discuss suicide and mental health openly in schools, workplaces and homes to break the stigma associated with these and encourage distressed persons to seek help (Liu, 2019).

During the Parliamentary debate on the Bill, MP for Holland-Bukit Timah GRC, Christopher De Souza, urged the government to rethink decriminalisation, arguing that the crime could be retained while expanding support services. However, most other MPs supported decriminalisation combined with enhanced support services and awareness. Mr Amrin reassured Parliament that euthanasia and abetment of attempted suicide remained criminal offences (Navene, 2019). The Criminal Law Reform Bill was passed on May 6 and most of its provisions took effect in January 2020.

Challenges to Section 377A

Three men filed separate legal challenges against Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises sex between men. Their challenges came in the aftermath of the Indian Supreme Court striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a similar law. The cases were heard in November in the High Court Chambers (Lam, 2019).

The first case by Mr Bryan Choong, argued that recently declassified documents in the British archives demonstrated that Section 377A was introduced in 1938 to curb “rampant male prostitution” and was never intended to target sexual intimacy between consenting male adults. The second case by Mr Johnson Ong put forth scientific evidence on the biological nature of sexual orientation, and argued that the law violated constitutional protections by discriminating against people based on their “natural, unchangeable identity and non-harmful private acts” (Lam, 2019). The final case by Dr Roy Tan centred on the alleged arbitrary and inconsistent application of the law.

The Attorney-General’s Chambers submitted that Section 377A was intended to send “a certain moral signal” by its mere existence and that it was a “deeply divisive socio-political

issue” that was for Parliament, not the judiciary, to decide on its future. The verdicts are expected sometime in 2020 (Lam, 2019).

Amendments to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act

The government announced a review of the 30-year-old Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in July. The law allows the Home Affairs Minister to issue a restraining order against a leader or member of any religious group, if the minister is satisfied that the person has committed, or is trying to commit, any act that might incite “enmity, hatred, ill will or hostility between different religious groups”, or that promotes a political cause under the guise of propagating religious beliefs. It has never been invoked since coming into force in 1992 (Mokhtar, 2019). Law and Home Affairs Minister Shanmugam cited the “coarseness of public discourse”, especially on online platforms, and added that the authorities “need a more robust set of tools to make sure we can stop the spreading of hate and discord”. (Kwang, 2019d).

The proposed changes were tabled in Parliament in September and spanned four key areas. First, the minister would be able to issue a restraining order against an offending online post that would take effect immediately instead of serving a 14-day period of notice to the person. Second, a new scheme called the Community Remedial Initiative would be introduced as an alternative to a public trial, and offer offenders a chance to voluntarily reconcile with the offended religion. Third, the MRHA would be amended to restrict foreigners from leading religious organisations or donating to them, to reduce the risk of foreign influence. Finally, religious offences would be ported over from the Penal Code to the MRHA, with penalties enhanced especially for religious leaders who commit such offences (Ng J. S., 2019a).

MPs welcomed the proposed changes as timely, but questioned how terms such as “insult” and “wounding of religious feelings” would be defined. The WP raised the issue of separation of politics and religion, citing how some religious leaders and groups were close to certain MPs and expressed open support or opposition to government policies. Mr Shanmugam responded by stating that religious leaders still had full civil and political rights but agreed that they should be mindful about not “engaging in general political discourse” and exercise care when making statements (Ng J. S., 2019b). With regard to specific terms, he pointed out that they had been used in the Penal Code for years and that the law was not meant to stifle sensible discussions. The amendments were passed on October 7 with bipartisan support (Ng J. S., 2019c).

Restrictions on Personal Mobility Devices

As the popularity of Personal Mobility Devices (PMDs) increased, so did the rate of accidents and battery fires in 2019. The government moved to severely restrict the use of PMDs in response to growing public concern.

In January, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) issued new rules restricting speed limits for all riders to 10km/h on footpaths, down from 15km/h previously (CNA, 2019i). To better enforce the speed regulations, LTA introduced a function in July to report errant PMDs on its MyTransport.SG app, which has 700,000 users. This followed the introduction of the compulsory registration of PMDs earlier that month, with more than 85,000 PMDs registered by the deadline at the end of June. Extra closed-circuit cameras or CCTVs were also installed to catch PMD riders flouting the speed limits (Toh, 2019a).

With the continuing spate of fires attributed to charging PMDs, LTA announced a review of the deadline for devices to comply with the UL2272 safety certification. Originally scheduled for end-2020, the deadline was brought forward to July 2020. It was also announced that all PMDs would need to undergo compulsory inspection from April 2020 to ensure compliance with the UL2272 standard (Aqil, 2019a).

In September, the 15 People's Action Party (PAP) town councils announced a ban on PMDs, bicycles and power-assisted bicycles (PABs) at the void decks of HDB blocks. The move was in response to public concerns about increasing PMD-related accidents (Malavika, 2019). Later that month, the Active Mobility Advisory Panel released a set of recommendations on tightening the rules on PMD use. It called for PMD users to be aged at least 16 and pass a theory test before they can ride on public paths. The panel also recommended that businesses be required to take out insurance to cover employees using PMDs for work purposes (Tan C., 2019).

When questioned in Parliament in October about the effectiveness of safety measures implemented so far, Senior Minister of State for Transport Janil Puthuchery announced that the ministry would conduct a review of the government's approach to PMDs. He also warned that there would be "no choice" but to completely ban them if user behaviours failed to improve (Oh, 2019). Dr Puthuchery also referred to the recent death of a 65-year-old woman who sustained serious brain injuries after a speeding PMD user collided with her. Statistics from Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) showed that in the first three quarters of 2019, 79 PMD riders were admitted to TTSH compared with 87 cases for the whole of 2018 (Choo, 2019a).

On November 4, the government announced a ban on all e-scooters from footpaths that would begin the next day. The ban meant that users would be confined to the 440km of cycling paths island wide, instead of the 5,500km of footpaths they had access to previously (Toh, 2019b). The authorities would issue warnings to errant users until the end of the year, before adopting a zero-tolerance approach from 2020.

The ban caught e-scooter retailers and food delivery riders off guard, with hundreds gathering at the weekly Meet-The-People Sessions with Members of Parliament (MPs) to air their grievances about being unable to work. Some riders pointed out that they had invested in costlier devices which met the UL2272 safety certification and were now left out of pocket. Academic and Nominated Member of Parliament Walter Theseira said the government could have consulted the stakeholders instead of announcing the ban as a "surprise" but also conceded that public concern over PMD safety was high (Sim D., 2019b).

To alleviate their concerns, the government quickly announced a S\$7 million grant to help food delivery riders replace their e-scooters with PABs or bicycles. The grant would be administered by the three main companies: Foodpanda, Grab and Deliveroo, which would also work with retailers to conduct bulk purchases of bicycles and PABs to lower costs to their riders. Riders who wished to switch jobs would be offered career support services while those with immediate financial difficulties could seek ComCare assistance. MPs also promised to bring the riders' other concerns and suggestions to the Transport Ministry and Cabinet (Toh & Wong, 2019).

NS Training Death

Popular local actor Aloysius Pang died on January 23 from a training incident while on reservist training in New Zealand. He had been carrying out repairs inside a self-propelled Howitzer when he was crushed by a lowering gun barrel. Pang was immediately evacuated to Waikato Hospital where he succumbed to his injuries (CNA, 2019j).

Pang's death unleashed an outpouring of grief among his fans, with thousands turning up to pay their last respects at his two-day wake. Experts said that his status as a well-known actor "brought home the realisation that fatalities during national service can happen to anyone, even a celebrity". They also pointed out that the level of public grief also indicated that they did not accept such deaths as "unavoidable" during military training and demanded greater accountability and transparency from the authorities (Lim M. Z., 2019a).

A Committee of Inquiry was formed immediately to investigate the cause of the incident, with the members interviewing more than 20 people involved. The COI released its report on May 6, in which the "precipitating cause" was identified as the gun barrel being lowered without first ensuring that everyone in the vehicle was in a safe position. The other two personnel, a regular technician and the reservist gun commander, both "acted irrationally" instead of pressing the emergency stop buttons when the gun barrel hit Pang. Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen added that Pang's death was "preventable had there been compliance to safety rules" (Aqil, 2019b).

The two servicemen involved in the incident were later charged in military court and received fines, with the reservist gun commander also demoted from Third Sergeant to Corporal (Lim M. Z., 2019b).

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Cabinet Reshuffle

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announced on April 23 that Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat would be appointed Deputy Prime Minister from May 1. He retained his finance portfolio while the two existing DPMs, Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam, relinquished their appointments and were appointed Senior Ministers (SM). SM Teo continued as Coordinating Minister for National Security while SM Tharman became Coordinating Minister for Social Policies (Lai, 2019c).

Political observers noted that Mr Heng's appointment as the sole DPM was a clear indication that he would be the next prime minister. Dr Lam Peng Er of the East Asian Institute pointed out that Heng's designation as Acting PM in PM Lee's absence was "significant in expelling any remaining doubts" (Au-Yong, 2019b). Contrary to expectations of a major reshuffle, the relatively minor changes put the spotlight solely on Mr Heng, allowing him the space to make decisions and develop his leadership style (Au-Yong, 2019b).

Aljunied-Hougang Town Council Case

The long-running Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC) trial reached a new milestone when the three WP MPs, Sylvia Lim, Pritam Singh and Low Thia Khiang, were found liable by the High Court for the damage suffered from not following procedures in a procurement exercise. The judge ruled that they had put their political interests above their fiduciary duties to AHTC

in relation to the appointment of FMSS as the new managing agent after the WP won the constituency in the 2011 election (Tham & Au-Yong, 2019).

As the MPs studied the judgement, residents in Aljunied GRC interviewed by the media were not surprised by the verdict but hoped that the case would not result in their disqualification as MPs. With damages yet to be assessed, some residents wanted to wait till the final verdict before deciding on their voting choices while others felt the MPs should apologise for the lapses. Political observers noted that the WP's place in Singapore's political landscape would be at serious risk if the assessed damages are enough to bankrupt and disqualify the three heavyweight parliamentarians from contesting in the next general election (Rei & Lai, 2019).

DPM Heng tabled a parliamentary motion on November 5 calling on Ms Lim, Mr Pritam and Mr Low to recuse themselves from dealing with any further financial matters at AHTC. Declaring that the party "cannot stay silent", he said that the WP had neither apologised for the lapses nor announced any measures to remedy them. "The Opposition must hold themselves to the same standards that they rightly impose on the government," added DPM Heng (Tang & Co, 2019).

However, Ms Lim called his motion "premature", revealing that the MPs had decided to appeal the judgement. DPM Heng soon after called for an adjournment and was replaced by Senior Minister of State for Law Edwin Tong in the ensuing parliamentary debate. Mr Tong accused the WP of peddling a "misleading narrative repeatedly put out to the public over several years" and rebutted several of the points raised (Yong N., 2019). The parliamentary motion was passed with 52 votes in favour, nine against and two abstentions (Tang & Co, 2019). A week later, the WP MPs filed their appeal against the judgement, with the hearing expected to be held in 2020 (Lim L., 2019).

Tan Cheng Bock's New Political Party

In February, media reports revealed that former PAP MP and presidential candidate Tan Cheng Bock had applied to register a new political party named Progress Singapore Party (PSP). Among the office-holders named in the registration forms were several former PAP cadres and businessmen, most of whom knew Dr Tan from his time as a PAP MP at Ayer Rajah from 1980 to 2006. It was also reported that Dr Tan had approached some former PAP MPs to join his team but they all declined. Political observers said that the PSP would need to prove itself to be bigger than Dr Tan and work on attracting younger members to its platform (Faris, 2019).

With the PSP formally registered in March, Dr Tan held a press conference in July to explain his motivations behind the decision to enter opposition politics. Stating that there was an "erosion of transparency, independence and accountability" in Singapore's governance system, he pledged to work with other opposition parties to serve as a "unifying alternative" to the PAP (Matthew, 2019b). The PSP drew the support of Lee Hsien Yang, the estranged younger brother of PM Lee. In a Facebook post, he called Dr Tan "the leader Singapore deserves". While Dr Tan said he was willing to take in Mr Lee as a member, political watchers cautioned that this might get the PSP entangled in the wider family feud between the Lee siblings (SCMP, 2019b).

Electoral Boundaries Review Committee Formed

The Elections Department carried out two key functions that often prelude elections: The changing of polling district boundaries in March, and the certification of voter rolls in April (Tham Y.-C., 2019c).

As speculation of early polls grew, WP chief Pritam Singh tabled the question in Parliament in February on whether the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) had been formed. He criticised the government for not announcing the formation of the EBRC as a matter of practice, adding: “It would be a waste of Parliament’s time and even bordering on an abuse of process if an MP had to file the same parliamentary question to the Prime Minister when rumours of an imminent election are in the air.” Mr Chan Chun Sing replied that the EBRC had yet to be convened. (Choo, 2019b). Mr Pritam filed the question once again in July, with Mr Chan replying that the EBRC had still not yet been appointed (Au-Yong, 2019c).

The speculation was put to rest when the Elections Department announced on September 4 that the EBRC had been formed in August, without providing the specific date. It added that the committee had been tasked with further reducing the size of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and with increasing the number of Single Member Constituencies (SMCs). The EBRC has generally taken between two to four months to deliberate proposed changes (Au-Yong, 2019).

Opposition politicians continued to question the independence of the Elections Department and the EBRC, noting that it reported to the Prime Minister’s Office. DPM Heng refuted such notions, pointing out that the committee is made up of independent civil servants (Tee, 2019).

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Ties with China & the United States

Singapore strengthened defence ties with both the US and China in 2019, signing new agreements and renewing existing ones. During Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen’s meeting with Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe in May, both countries announced a “substantial programme” to deepen military ties. Experts observed that this was in line with Singapore’s “well-known foreign policy stance of not choosing sides”. The development was significant coming nearly three years after Singapore’s Terrex armoured vehicles were briefly seized in Hong Kong while returning home after exercises in Taiwan ostensibly because it did not have the required licences in place (Jaipragas, 2019b). The enhanced Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC) was signed in October in Beijing, formalising ongoing defence activities as well as committing to more bilateral exercises and regular exchanges (Aqil, 2019c).

Concurrently, Singapore and the United States also agreed to update and renew a key agreement that allows the US to use Singapore’s air and naval bases. The 1990 Memorandum of Understanding has underpinned the continuing US presence in Southeast Asia since American forces left Subic Bay bases in the Philippines (Bhagyashree, 2019). The renewal was signed by PM Lee and US President Donald Trump in September in New York. It was the second time the MOU was being renewed, the first being in 2005 (Tanoto, 2019). A separate agreement was also signed by both countries’ defence ministers allowing the Republic of

Singapore Air Force (RSAF) to set up a fighter training detachment in the US Pacific territory of Guam. Dr Ng said that this would “also allow quick redeployment of assets back to Singapore when required” (CNA, 2019k).

Bilateral Ties with Malaysia

The year began with a continued stalemate between Singapore and Malaysia over air traffic control issues and disputed port limits. A collision between the Malaysian government vessel MV *Polaris* and a Greek merchant ship *Pireaus* in Singapore’s territorial waters occurred on February 9, about two months after Singapore extended its port limits off Tuas in response to repeated intrusions by Malaysian vessels (Lim J., 2019c). The government responded by renewing its call for Malaysian vessels to withdraw from the area, adding that “Malaysia will be responsible for any untoward situations on the ground that arise from continued deployment of its vessels into this area” (Cheng, 2019b). The standoff was resolved in March when both countries agreed to jointly suspend their overlapping port limits and return to the limits preceding the crisis. They also agreed to suspend all commercial activities in the area and not anchor government vessels there (Karamjit, 2019a).

Efforts to resolve continuing differences over Singapore’s implementation of the Instrument Landing System (ILS) at Seletar Airport continued until April, when both countries reached an agreement to defuse the situation. Singapore agreed to withdraw the ILS while Malaysia agreed to suspend the air restrictions it had imposed over Pasir Gudang just north of Seletar Airport indefinitely. A high-level committee was tasked to review the agreement governing air traffic control over southern Johor, which Singapore has managed but that Malaysia would like to reclaim (Karamjit, 2019b).

Malaysia requested a six-month extension of the deadline for its response to Singapore on the Rapid Transit System (RTS) project between Singapore and Johor Bahru. This was the third delay it had requested, with the first two being in September and December 2018. Singapore agreed to Malaysia’s request and an agreement was signed on May 21, deferring the construction to September 30. Malaysia also agreed to reimburse Singapore more than \$600,000 for abortive costs relating to the suspension (Lim A., 2019c). In November, Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan stated that Malaysia had again requested a further extension of six months and that Singapore had agreed to this request “in the spirit of bilateral cooperation”. Malaysia announced on October 31 that it would eventually go ahead with the RTS with some modifications, with both countries continuing discussions (CNA, 2019l).

Trade Ties

2019 saw major progress in the long-awaited Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Singapore and the European Union (EU). The European Parliament voted to approve the deal on February 13, paving the way for Singapore and EU member states to submit the agreement to their national parliaments for approval (CNA, 2019m). The final step was approval from the EU Council, which gave its assent on November 8, with the FTA finally entering into force on November 21.

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