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Citation

TAN, Eugene K. B.. Singapore's Covid-19 general election: Political breakthrough amid a generational crisis?. (2020). *Round Table*. 109, (5), 622-623.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3263

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OPINION



Singapore's Covid-19 general election: political breakthrough amid a generational crisis?

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In the 13th general election since independence, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) – which has governed Singapore since 1959 – won 83 out of 93 seats, with a popular vote share of 61.24%, its third lowest on record. The Workers' Party (WP) won 10 seats, including an unprecedented two multi-member electoral constituencies, cementing its standing as the leading opposition party. Not only did this outcome fall short of the strong mandate the PAP had sought, it was arguably its worst electoral performance since independence as the PAP's control of elected seats dipped below 90% for the first time.

In experiencing its worst health and economic crisis, which Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described as the 'crisis of a generation', voters were expected to adopt a 'flight to safety' mindset. This would, ordinarily, have worked to the PAP's advantage. Instead, there was a flight away from the status quo ante.

Initially the Covid-19 outbreak had been kept at bay, but the surge in infections necessitated an 8-week 'circuit breaker', a lockdown of sorts, between April and June. The pandemic had by then exposed the soft underbelly of Singaporean society, including the massive infections in many foreign worker dormitories where more than 300,000 migrant workers reside cheek by jowl.

More specifically, the circuit breaker laid bare the vulnerabilities, gaps, and divides in a wealthy country, and pushed to the forefront the question of the city-state's core values, identity, and how it should remake itself to be a fairer, more just, and compassionate society in a post-Covid world.

While the election results demonstrated voters' preference for and recognition of the PAP's technocratic ability and track record, it also raised significant concerns over its paternalistic approach to governance. Often, the manner in which policies were decided and implemented left the indelible impression that the PAP government was so convinced of its good intentions, policy nous and outcomes that it ignored the deeper concerns of the people.

Moreover, voters showed their preference for a more competitive political landscape, and appreciated the role of a credible, responsible, and loyal opposition. The opposition, especially the WP and the Progress Singapore Party, reciprocated with their bold party manifestos and offered more real choices through their diverse and quality slate of candidates.

The PAP's manifesto of 'Our Lives, Our Jobs, Our Future' centred on the public health and economic emergency that the Covid-19 pandemic has ignited. Between February and June 2020, the PAP government put together four budgets to help Singaporeans and the business community cope with the onslaught of the pandemic. This required a rare drawdown of the city-state's reserves to fund a comprehensive SGD93 billion package of counter-measures.

However, the perception of the PAP's unrelenting focus during the campaign on material well-being appeared tone-deaf in the face of voters' concerns that went beyond bread-and-butter issues. The opposition better engaged voters on post-material values and concerns that were lacking in the aspiration for a fairer and more just society.

Post-election, PM Lee promptly decided to provide formally recognise the WP leader, Pritam Singh, as the 'Leader of the Opposition'. This is an important and timely development in institutionalising the opposition's role in Singapore's system of constitutional checks and balances. Although there will be no shadow Cabinet for now, the office will enable the opposition to better scrutinise government laws and policies. The government has exhorted the opposition to go beyond merely asking tough questions of the government to crafting their own policies and having them scrutinised in Parliament.

Despite the opposition's electoral gains, the election results show simultaneously the putative importance and the relative impotence of opposition politics in Singapore. In similar vein, the PAP increasingly has to grapple with its own perpetual conundrum of its instinctive quest for political dominance, if not hegemony. Perhaps as a marker of a generational change, millennials and Gen-Zs view one-party dominance as a freakish, even unfair, state of affairs that needs rectification.

The change in voting preferences tentatively points to voters being increasingly sensitive to *how* that dominance is attained and used. How the PAP responds to voters' concerns expressed during the hustings will influence the pace of political change in Singapore, which is on the cusp of a leadership generational change. If PAP is unable to dictate the pace of political change, the 2020 election may well be a breakthrough in Singapore's political evolution towards a two-party or a multi-party political system.

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