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14th Parliament has weighty duty steering Singapore into post-Covid-19 future

Eugene Tan K. B.

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Parliament, working with Singaporeans and representing their interests and voices, must endeavour to remake Singapore to be a fairer, more just, and compassionate society, says the author.

In more ways than one, the five-year term of Singapore's 14th Parliament has been and will be defined even before it begins.

How this institution of the people's representatives leads the nation amid the raging Covid-19 global pandemic and positions Singapore for the post-Covid world matters immensely.

Parliament opens on Monday (Aug 24) in the shadow of an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis.

The urgency of the monumental tasks ahead is evident — Parliament is sitting a mere six weeks after the General Election. (The 13th Parliament first sat on Jan 15, 2016, slightly more than four months after the General Election on Sept 11, 2015.)

The new Parliament will have 12 representatives from the Opposition, comprising 10 elected Workers' Party Members of Parliament (MPs) and two non-constituency MPs from the Progress Singapore Party.

While still dominant with 83 MPs, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) holds less than 90 per cent of the elected seats for the first time since the 1963 election for the Legislative Assembly. Nine nominated MPs will join the House later, making this the largest Parliament.

There are 28 female lawmakers, the largest number and proportion in independent Singapore's history, including the youngest MP in Ms Raeesah Khan, at 26 years of age.

Nine of 37 political office-holders are women. While there remains a long way to go in terms of gender parity in politics, with more female MPs, the role of women in politics can be normalised.

Although the substance of the debate is not likely to be vastly different, more woman MPs can help ensure that women's perspectives and concerns on key issues of the day are better represented.

Nuances to the issues that affect women and children, such as caregiving and work-life balance, can be better articulated.

Parliament's opening is the only occasion in the national calendar where members of the three branches of Government — the legislature, the executive and the judiciary — gather.

The highlight of Parliament's opening is the President's Address where Madam Halimah Yacob will unveil the Government's priorities and agenda for action.

Many MPs' speeches debating the address can be expected to dwell on Covid-19's impact on society. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech during this debate will also double up as his traditional National Day Rally, which has been cancelled.

This unprecedented crisis is already severely testing Singaporeans, with jobs and livelihoods uppermost on citizens' minds. The tenor of our society as it navigates the crisis is also of deep concern.

Earlier this month, economic data confirmed that Singapore suffered its deepest economic slump on record between April and June this year, as the economy shrank 13.2 percent from a year earlier.

As Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing put it starkly, a return to the familiarity of the old normal is unrealistic: “The painful truth is this — we are not returning to a pre-Covid world, recovery will be some time yet and is not likely to be smooth.”

The economy is likely to shrink between 5 and 7 per cent this year on the back of weak domestic and external demand as the virus wreaks havoc on the global economy, on which Singapore is so heavily dependent. The worst is yet to come and more job losses are expected.

Recover we must but this Parliament’s term will be defined by how Singapore recovers as the road to the next normal is going to be a long and hard slog.

The recession will be cushioned by the S\$101 billion government stimulus package that the last Parliament had passed over four budgets within 100 days.

But as Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat’s ministerial statement last week underscores, the massive fiscal boost to support businesses and to protect Singaporean workers cannot be sustained given the uncertainty of when the coronavirus outbreak would end.

Tough, even unpopular, measures will be invariably needed and Parliament will have to scrutinise the Government’s actions and hold it accountable, something for which Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin has given his assurance.

But even as tackling the economic downturn is key, the imperative for Parliament is to be “bifocal” and to press on with the effort to ensure that Singapore emerges stronger. Can we have the first-mover advantage when the recovery begins?

Policies and plans are already being unrolled to this end and embedded within this is the larger question of how, as a society, we will shape the post-Covid Singapore to be a better version than the pre-Covid one.

Laws alone will be inadequate. This speaks not only to the need to generate economic value but to entrench the values necessary to tackle the vulnerabilities, gaps and divides in society.

Parliament, working with Singaporeans and representing their interests and voices, must endeavour to remake Singapore to be a fairer, more just, and compassionate society.

The 14th Parliament is, in essence, a reflection of Singaporeans’ preference for a more competitive and diverse political system and the role of a credible, responsible and loyal opposition.

To this end, the new Leader of the Opposition office institutionalises 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 go some way to help the opposition better scrutinise government laws and policies.

There will certainly be intense contestation over the role of the opposition in Singapore’s one-party dominant political system. The Government has exhorted the opposition to go beyond merely asking tough questions to crafting their own policies and having them debated in Parliament.

As the July General Election results show, Singaporean voters are not averse to one-party dominance. However, the change in voting preferences 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 and how it governs will influence the pace of political change in Singapore.

Change is also in the air as Singapore is on the cusp of a leadership transition. During the course of this Parliament's term there will likely be a new Prime Minister as Mr Lee Hsien Loong passes the baton to Mr Heng Swee Keat and the fourth-generation (4G) leadership.

Time is of the essence as the 4G leaders not only have to deal with the crisis but firmly establish themselves as worthy of the trust and confidence of Singaporeans.

As MPs take their oath of office, Parliament's heavy responsibility to adequately and courageously represent the people is even more crucial during these challenging times.

Moreover, the unity of purpose of Parliament is vital as we continue to work towards keeping the pandemic at bay and nurturing a more inclusive, cohesive, and gracious society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor law at the Singapore Management University and served as a Nominated Member of Parliament in the 12th Parliament.