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GE2020 commentary: Assessing the voters' message to PAP (and other parties)

Eugene Tan K. B.

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Despite the “crisis of a generation”, the 2020 general election results point to a considered flight from the status quo, rather than a flight to safety.

Singaporean voters, through their 2.54 million ballots cast, sent a nuanced message to all political parties and election candidates. It was a renewed, urgent expression of a vote for change, more so than in the 2011 election.

For the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), winning 83 out of 93 seats with a popular vote share of 61.24 per cent — while indicative of a “clear mandate” — fell short of the strong mandate it had sought. In losing an unprecedented second group representation constituency (GRC), it also lost three political office-holders in the process.

Many GRCs, including those helmed by the PAP fourth-generation (4G) ministers, also saw the ground shift significantly against them.

This raises questions whether the next generation leadership has truly earned the trust and confidence of Singaporeans. This could not come at a worse time for leadership succession.

Will Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong still hand over the reins of power within the next two years as he had indicated previously, given his latest pledge to see Singapore through the Covid-19 crisis before passing the baton to his successor?

In contrast, the Workers' Party (WP) made handsome gains despite fielding a relatively inexperienced slate of 21 candidates.

In its best electoral outing, the WP won 10 seats — successfully defending Hougang and Aljunied, and adding the new Sengkang GRC. The feared opposition wipe-out did not materialise. Instead, the WP secured a strong endorsement and has entrenched its standing as the leading opposition party.

As PAP reviews the election result, it must be a no-holds barred post-mortem not only of its election campaign but also how it governed between 2015 and 2020.

The perpetual conundrum the PAP has to grapple with is its own instinctive quest for political dominance, if not hegemony, which is increasingly at odds with the electorate's growing belief that political competition, diversity, and contestation are critical ingredients of a robust system of good governance.

More voters, especially those born post 1980, view one-party dominance as a freakish even unfair state of affairs.

The real issue, however, is not so much about one-party dominance but rather about PAP's paternalistic style of governance.

Thus, one of the voters' nuanced messages was the need for the PAP to be more trusting of the people and to focus on how it governs.

The election results also point to voters' preference for and recognition of the PAP's technocratic ability but also significant concerns over whether the party is able to govern with empathy, humility, and an emphasis on servant leadership.

The way policies are implemented often leaves Singaporeans with the impression that the PAP Government is so convinced of its good intentions and policy outcomes that it ignores the deeper concerns of the people.

It's not merely about governing well, which is expected or even demanded, but how to govern in a manner that takes in Singaporeans' concerns in both form and substance.

The uncontested first reserved presidential election in 2017 and the perceived high-handed use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act to deal with falsehoods, are two examples which indelibly gave the perception that the PAP knows best and that Singaporeans cannot be trusted to discern and decide for themselves.

Voters also showed their preference for a more diverse and competitive political landscape, which the WP and the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) tapped to good effect with their campaign pledges of being a responsible opposition.

Voters have internalised the importance of good governance and are prepared to support a credible opposition for the needed system of checks and balances.

The PAP's manifesto was largely concerned about the impact of Covid-19. This was not surprising but the PAP appeared tone-deaf in not appreciating voters' concerns going beyond bread-and-butter issues.

WHAT NEXT FOR THE OPPOSITION

Ironically, in seeking a new mandate, PAP sought to leverage on the crisis unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic. But the pandemic has interrogated how wealth creation and economic growth be attained and shared as well as exposed the soft underbelly of Singapore society.

It laid bare the vulnerabilities, gaps, and divides of our society such as income inequality, the challenges faced by families and individuals in a system that had prided itself as one where every Singaporean mattered.

The unfolding pandemic in the last six months was a rude reality check. Voters were not staring at an imminent crisis; they were already in one, right in the eye of the storm.

This meant that voters did not harbour a flight to safety mindset.

It provided the perfect segue for the Opposition to engage voters on issues that resonated with them, especially post-material concerns. These speak intimately to the values and ethos of our society, including how we can be fairer as well as more caring and compassionate.

The Opposition was therefore able to capitalise on varying degrees of concern over whether complacency and arrogance have set in the Government and advocated a more even-handed approach to both material and post-material well being.

The WP and PSP were able to appeal to voters that they can play a constructive role. Crucially, they offered voters a viable choice through the quality of their candidates and party platforms.

The success of WP, and to a lesser extent that of PSP contesting in its first election, will likely encourage Singaporeans to consider these parties as attractive alternatives to the PAP.

For the other smaller parties which continued not to make meaningful progress in this election from the last two elections, they risk becoming irrelevant to the political landscape.

PM Lee's plan to provide formal recognition of the WP leader, Mr Pritam Singh, as the Leader of the Opposition is an important and timely development.

It recognises the Opposition's role in our system of constitutional checks and balances. It also signals that the Government's desire to work with the elected opposition in a collaborative manner for the good of Singapore.

While it is not clear what privileges, protocol, support and resources will be provided, the office will enable the Opposition to better scrutinise government laws and policies and be recognised as a critical partner in government and governance.

Legislation will have to be passed to officially recognise such an office and to enable the allocation of public funds to support such an office.

The Leader of the Opposition office may signal the need for Singapore to prepare for its evolution from a one-party dominant system to a two-party or multi-party democracy.

In the United Kingdom, the Leader of the Opposition has a "Shadow Cabinet" that follows and examines the work of government departments and develops policies in their specific areas.

Will this be part of the plan? Perhaps not for the time being, given that WP will take up only 10.8 per cent of seats in the 14th Parliament.

All things considered, GE2020 is a watershed election, with many implications still unfolding.

What the PAP and the Opposition individually and collectively make of the election, especially the verdict of the voters nation-wide and in individual wards, is crucial to our future.

Many ideas and policy proposals were raised in the course of the hustings that resonated with Singaporeans. They should be considered by the Government.

Now that the electoral battle for the hearts and minds of Singaporeans is over, it's time for Singaporeans to set aside their political affiliations and work together for a better future in the post-Covid world.

In this way, Singapore and Singaporeans would come out winners in GE2020 in more ways than one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor at the Singapore Management University School of Law. He served as a Nominated Member of Parliament between 2012 and 2014.