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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. One year on since GE2020: Thinking afresh for the post-Covid era. (2021). *Business Times (Singapore)*. 4-4.

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One year on since GE2020: Thinking afresh for the post-Covid era

Eugene Tan K. B.

Published in Business Times, 2021 July 14, p. 4.

Remaking Singapore to be a fairer, more just, and compassionate society in a post-Covid world is a key responsibility for Parliament.

“At the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into a little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper”.

This was former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's compliment of the "overwhelming importance" of the democratic act of voting.

It has been a little over a year since Singaporeans went to the polls for the 13th general election on July 10, 2020. Since then, Parliament has had a busy legislative agenda, with the pandemic dominating.

Even as politics become more contested, there remains a big unknown: How have Singaporeans' attitudes and values towards politics, economy, and life been upended and re- shaped by the unprecedented crisis?

To recap, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) secured a clear mandate from the voters, winning 83 of 93 seats and 61.2 per cent of the popular vote.

The Workers' Party (WP) turned in their best-ever performance, winning 10 seats, including two group representation constituencies, cementing its standing as the leading opposition party.

The night after the results were announced, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong provided formal recognition to the WP secretary-general Pritam Singh as the first-ever Leader of the Opposition.

This important and timely development in institutionalising the opposition's role in Singapore's system of constitutional checks and balances cannot be underestimated.

Mr Lee also exhorted the WP to go beyond merely asking tough questions of the government to crafting their own policies and having them scrutinised in Parliament.

Post-election, the PAP government has had to hit the ground running to fulfil its pledge to protect lives and livelihoods in the "crisis of a generation".

The government's technocratic nous is being severely tested, and the fourth-generation (4G) leadership's ability to lead and galvanise the nation is under intense scrutiny.

Both the PAP and WP robustly cross swords in Parliament on a variety of issues, ranging from minimum wage, the ethnic integration policy in public housing, and the government's handling of Covid-19.

Consensus-building

Since January 2021, parliamentary sittings are livestreamed. Notwithstanding the political point-scoring and rhetorical posturing, there must be more light than heat generated in the debates even as political competition sharpens.

A deeper understanding and broader consensus must develop on critical issues.

A citizenry that is none the wiser on the key issues of the day cannot augur well as Singapore deals with pressing issues - such as ensuring inter-generational equity, immigration, population, national identity, and foreign relations - for which there are no clear answers.

The pandemic here is evolving from a public health threat to a momentous political and economic challenge.

How the government engages citizens' growing post-material aspirations and concerns, such as a more competitive political landscape, greater social mobility and equality, climate change concerns, and ethnic issues, take on greater prominence and importance.

As Singapore prepares for a significant economic reopening, how the government manages it and carries the ground matters. It also has to resolutely address the vulnerabilities, gaps, and divides exposed by the pandemic.

The pandemic has also upset the political succession plans with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's surprise decision in April to step aside as the leader of the 4G team.

The 60-year-old reasoned that the pandemic meant that he would have "too short a runway" as prime minister by the time it is over.

As the 4G leaders finalise their consensus on who is to lead them, an inordinate delay in political succession will raise legitimate concerns on their readiness to work together and lead Singapore.

In the past year, the co-existence of the putative importance and relative impotence of opposition politics in Singapore is underscored.

Even as the opposition endeavours to keep the government on its toes, its ability to move the needle on key policies remains to be validated.

Even if the PAP enjoys a "vaccine bounce" from its handling of the pandemic, it must grapple with its instinctive quest for overwhelming political dominance, 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.

Shift in tone

The government appears to have adopted a tonal shift through being increasingly sensitive in responding to various issues to win back support and not let its electoral support erode further.

For example, in September last year, the government initiated the "Conversations on Women Development" to comprehensively review issues affecting Singaporean women.

It will culminate in a White Paper later this year that should presage the status quo being transformed on gender equality and respect for women.

In turn, this could also unleash nuanced approaches in other areas where society's civic fabric, culture, and mindsets must evolve in tandem with a different environment.

Recent race incidents and the relaxation of the no-tudung rule for Muslim nurses' uniforms underscore the imperative to think afresh and to reinforce the fundamentals of our *raison d'etre*.

This will require the even-handed redrawing of so-called "OB markers", developing the appropriate values and attitudes, and engendering more ground-up efforts to not only bring these necessary conversations into the various communities but also engaging them sensitively and openly.

Only with purposeful dialogue, continual engagement, and open hearts and minds will a stronger sense of who we are, a nuanced understanding of our differences, and a better appreciation of what needs to be done can materialise. Societal trust can then be further forged.

We do not know how long the raging pandemic and its unpredictable arc will prevail.

The past year vividly reminds us of the importance of leadership, resilience, long-term planning and anticipatory policy-making, and political trust - an outcome and antecedent of government effectiveness.

Having to live with Covid-19 offers that rare opportunity in stress-testing society and government and to build back better.

This must be the resolve and outcome or else, to use a cliché, the crisis would have been wasted. Remaking Singapore to be a fairer, more just, and compassionate society in a post-Covid world is a key responsibility for Parliament.

Amid the many uncertainties, how governance and politics evolve to deal with the challenges of the day will mould Singaporeans' political outlook and subtly influence the pace of political change in Singapore.

The PAP will seek to adroitly manage the pace of political change and burnish its performance legitimacy in the next few years.

The next general election, due by November 2025, will be another milestone in Singapore's political evolution. Singapore's political outlook is promising so long as the PAP and WP raise their game and unequivocally work for the common good.

Ultimately, politics and governance in Singapore must be about the best interests of Churchill's proverbial "little men and women" including the unborn generations.

The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University's Yong Pung How School of Law. He is also a former Nominated Member of Parliament.