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GE2020: No wipeout but another breakthrough for the Workers' Party

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COMMENTARY

GE2020: No wipeout but another breakthrough for the Workers' Party

The government this week spelt out the duties and privileges of the Leader of the Opposition, Workers' Party leader Pritam Singh. **Eugene Tan** looks at how the 2020 general election results show both the putative importance and the relative impotence of opposition politics in Singapore.

HELD in the midst of a "crisis of a generation", the 2020 general election saw a flight from the status quo, rather than a flight to safety. The change in voting preferences point to a generational change in how voters regard one-party dominance, particularly how it is attained and used by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP).

How the PAP government responds to voters' concerns expressed during the hustings will influence the pace of political change in Singapore. The election result was a good outcome for Singapore, noted Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in a Facebook post on July 19. He remarked that politics in Singapore have "changed permanently" following the recent election. The imperative is to "make this new balance work well for Singapore".

GE2020 may well be the breakthrough election for Singapore's leading opposition parties. The next few years offer strong growth prospects for the established Workers' Party (WP) and, to a lesser extent, the new Progress Singapore Party (PSP). Combined, the WP and PSP garnered 21 per cent of all valid votes cast, while the other eight Opposition parties polled slightly more than 17 per cent.

The WP successfully defended its seats in Hougang and Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC), and in a famous victory, snagged the new Sengkang GRC.

In the six PAP-WP contests, involving 21 seats, the WP polled more votes than the PAP (279,922 to 274,442). This points to WP's enhanced competitiveness against the PAP.

In winning a second GRC, the psychological odds of the opposition winning a GRC have been greatly reduced – never mind that the WP Sengkang team was up against a PAP team which had three office-holders.

Significant breakthrough

Patiently biding its time, the WP has been involved in every significant political breakthrough in Singapore general elections. Each breakthrough, arguably, sowed the seeds for subsequent ones.

Then-WP leader JB Jeyaretnam's win in the Anson by-election in 1981 broke the PAP's complete domination of Parliament between 1968 and 1981. A decade later, former WP leader Low Thia Khiang's win in Hougang in 1991 and repeated wins by Mr Low's three successors there since 2011 show that it is possible for the Opposition to remain electable even with the passing of the mantle.

The Aljunied GRC victory by WP in 2011 was another breaking of the political glass ceiling. It demonstrated that the Opposition can win a GRC, which between 1988 and 2011 seemed like an impregnable PAP political fortress.

WP's re-elections in Aljunied in 2015 and on

July 10 showed that the breakthrough victory was no fluke.

The WP has been described as a "middle-of-the-road" party that does not oppose for the sake of opposing. Being PAP-like, rather than PAP-lite, may well be a backhanded compliment for the WP.

It highlights the WP forging its niche role in a one-party dominant system. It is clear that the WP now wins votes in its own right, rather than gaining votes that are against the PAP.

For now, the election results show simultaneously the putative importance and the relative impotence of opposition politics in Singapore.

Slow-growing presence

On the former, through its slow-growing presence in Parliament since 1981, the WP has shown the crucial role and contribution of the Opposition in governance. On the latter, the WP is also abidingly realistic of what it can do in the face of the PAP's resilience and tenacity.

But might it be different this time?

Thus far, voters are at ease with the WP's moderate brand of politics that is premised on "change amid continuity" and that it does not oppose for opposition's sake. This approach helps assure those who are concerned that Singapore is not yet ready for a non-PAP government. This also engages those who prefer evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, political change.

The WP is astute enough to recognise that Singapore is deeply imprinted with the PAP institutional template, and that the WP would not help its or Singapore's cause if it were to take over the reins of government prematurely. It also is acutely aware that, despite being the leading opposition party, it still needs to ramp up its policy-making expertise and to contest in all seats to merit being the "government-in-waiting".

Not only must the WP go beyond manifesto-type policy prescriptions, it must also provide alternative policies that are seen as real and viable alternatives. In a post-Covid world, Singapore will need visionary, bold and inspiring governance and policies.

For example, both the government and the WP need to craft policies that can not only deal with hot-button issues such as tackling the economic emergency unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic, a more robust approach to economic growth, the vexed issue of decaying HDB leases, securing a balanced approach to immigration and foreign manpower, costs of living, and the wealth divide but to also manage them in a holistic manner such that policy success in one area does not have the unintended consequence of creating problems in another.

In the 14th Parliament, PSP has two Non-Constituency Members of Parliament after its West Coast team, led by the charismatic Tan Cheng Bock, engineered an almost 27 per cent

swing away from the PAP and nearly caused a major upset.

The PSP has got off to an impressive, unprecedented start. It will have to build on the momentum and demonstrate that it can continue to grow beyond Dr Tan, 80.

Reading the nuances in the electorate well, the WP and PSP have responded well to Singaporeans' desire for a credible and responsible Opposition by fielding a slate of well-qualified candidates who connected relatively well with voters.

Going by the past and latest election results, Singaporean voters are not averse to one party dominating. However, they are increasingly sensitive to how the dominance is used in governance.

Collectively, the Opposition has made important inroads in the recent election. Voters will reward handsomely an opposition party that they regard as being responsible and credible, as the examples of WP and PSP show.

The question of course is whether the Opposition can build on that in subsequent elections to generate the momentum and multiplier effect. The PAP was able to claw back Opposition gains in general elections of 1991 and 2011 in the subsequent elections of 1997 and 2015.

The smaller parties will have to redefine their relevance vis-à-vis Singapore's political landscape in light of the ascendancy of the WP. As the WP contests in more seats in future elections, the smaller parties risk not only becoming uncompetitive but also irrelevant.

In the years ahead, we can expect a breakthrough of sorts with some consolidation as smaller parties exit, merge, or form formal alliances or loose coalitions. For now, little differentiates most of the smaller opposition parties. Pooling of resources is essential if the smaller parties are to create a niche role for themselves in a more competitive political system.

Political cachet

WP's intrinsic value as the leading opposition party and its role in Singapore's evolving political landscape will improve its political cachet. They will be helped as the idea of one-party dominance is increasingly being questioned by voters.

In the coming decade, a key political question that will be robustly interrogated is whether the political and governance systems are tilted in favour of the PAP and what ought to be done about it. How the PAP responds to concerns of how it governs and the unlevel playing field will affect the pace of political change.

Looking ahead to the next election, the WP will likely contest in no more than a third of all elected seats. This incremental approach will enable the WP to continue to gain political ground without prematurely removing the PAP from power.

In addition, the WP will have to earnestly develop its unique operating system – one that will enable it to establish itself as PAP's political equal on the basis of the substance of its policy ideas, the integrity and ability of its politicians, and the courage to do right by Singapore and Singaporeans. That would be a breakthrough that will also be immensely beneficial to Singapore.

☞ The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University. He served as a Nominated Member of Parliament between 2012 and 2014.