

Ten reflections on GE 2015

Response to voter concerns, election strategy among the factors that helped PAP win big



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For The Straits Times

On Cooling-off Day, a good friend invited me to lunch with a group of eminent Singaporeans. I decided to use them as a focus group and asked them to predict whether the PAP's popular vote would go up or down.

The majority said it would go down. I asked them whether the PAP would lose any more seats to the opposition. The majority predicted that the PAP would lose one group representation constituency (GRC) and one single-member constituency (SMC).

Like the pundits and the bookies, my friends at lunch were wrong in their prognosis. The following are 10 of my reflections on the People's Action Party's surprising and extraordinary victory.

SG50

First, 2015 is not an ordinary year. It is our Golden Jubilee year. Singaporeans from all walks of life, and of different political persuasions, are very proud of what we have achieved in the past 50 years.

The SG50 Steering Committee has adopted a low-key, bottoms-up and people-centric approach to the year-long celebrations. The positive mood was boosted by the excellent performance of our athletes at the SEA Games, and by the conferment of World Heritage status on our beloved Botanic Gardens by Unesco.

Anyone who attended the National Day Parade would have been inspired by the pride, patriotism and unity of the occasion. I am sure that SG50 increased the popularity of the PAP at the polls.

THE LEE KUAN YEW FACTOR

Second, I think that the Lee Kuan Yew factor played a part in the electoral success of the PAP. Mr Lee's passing triggered a spontaneous outpouring of love and respect for him by Singaporeans. The people of Singapore acknowledged that the success of Singapore was due, in large part, to the vision, courage and determination of Mr Lee and the other founding fathers.

I am sure that some of the

goodwill for Mr Lee was transferred to the political party that he founded and led. The combination of the first and second factors made 2015 an exceptionally good year for the PAP. Tactically, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was right to hold the election this year, instead of next year.

FEAR OF A FREAK ELECTION

Third, the opposition made a big mistake in contesting all 89 seats in Parliament. Although many of the candidates, from parties other than the Workers' Party (WP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), had no prospect of winning, the fact that all seats were contested made it possible for the PAP to warn against a freak election.

The bottom line is that, while the electorate wants a credible, constructive and responsible opposition in Parliament, it also wants the PAP to continue to form the government. If the opposition had been wiser, it would have refrained from contesting 45 of the 89 seats so that, on Nomination Day, the PAP would have won enough seats to form the government. In such a scenario, the electorate would have been more at ease in voting for good opposition candidates.

THE SILVER VOTE

Fourth, since 2011, the Government has done several very significant things to win the hearts and minds of senior citizens. The Pioneer Generation Package, MediShield Life, and the Silver Support Scheme have been very well received. The belated recognition of the pioneers and their contributions to Singapore has touched the hearts of many older Singaporeans.

My hypothesis is that the majority of the half a million voters, over the age of 65, would have voted for the PAP.

REMEDYING THE PAIN POINTS

Fifth, the PAP has brought relief to three of the pain points that emerged in the 2011 General Election. These are housing, immigration and transport. National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan has increased the supply of public housing, and cooled the overheated property market.

The Government has also reduced the intake of foreign workers. Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew worked very hard on both the bus system and the MRT system. He has brought relief to the bus system. The problem of the frequent breakdown of our train system has, however, not yet been solved, in spite of his best efforts.

On the three pain points, the PAP

has brought relief to two-and-a-half of them. The electorate, which is fair-minded, has therefore decided to reward the PAP for having listened to its concerns and for responding to them.

THE CHALLENGE OF INEQUALITY

Sixth, the PAP has also responded to the growing concerns about inequality in Singapore. It has introduced schemes like Workfare and the Progressive Wage Model.

It has opened two schools for students who failed their Primary School Leaving Examination, or PSLE. It has upgraded the quality of technical and vocational education offered by our Institute of Technical Education. It has introduced a new educational initiative called SkillsFuture, based on the successful apprenticeship system in Germany and Switzerland. It has expanded its support for early education.

It has also reassured the public that social mobility is well, and stronger, in Singapore than in Europe and America. Therefore, although Singapore continues to be a very unequal society, and life is hard for the bottom 30 per cent of our population, the Government was given credit by the electorate for the many initiatives it has taken to address the problem.

CREDIBILITY OF THE WORKERS' PARTY

Seventh, the ascendance of the WP was seriously affected by the PAP's allegation that it had mismanaged the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council, and that it had exposed an integrity issue.

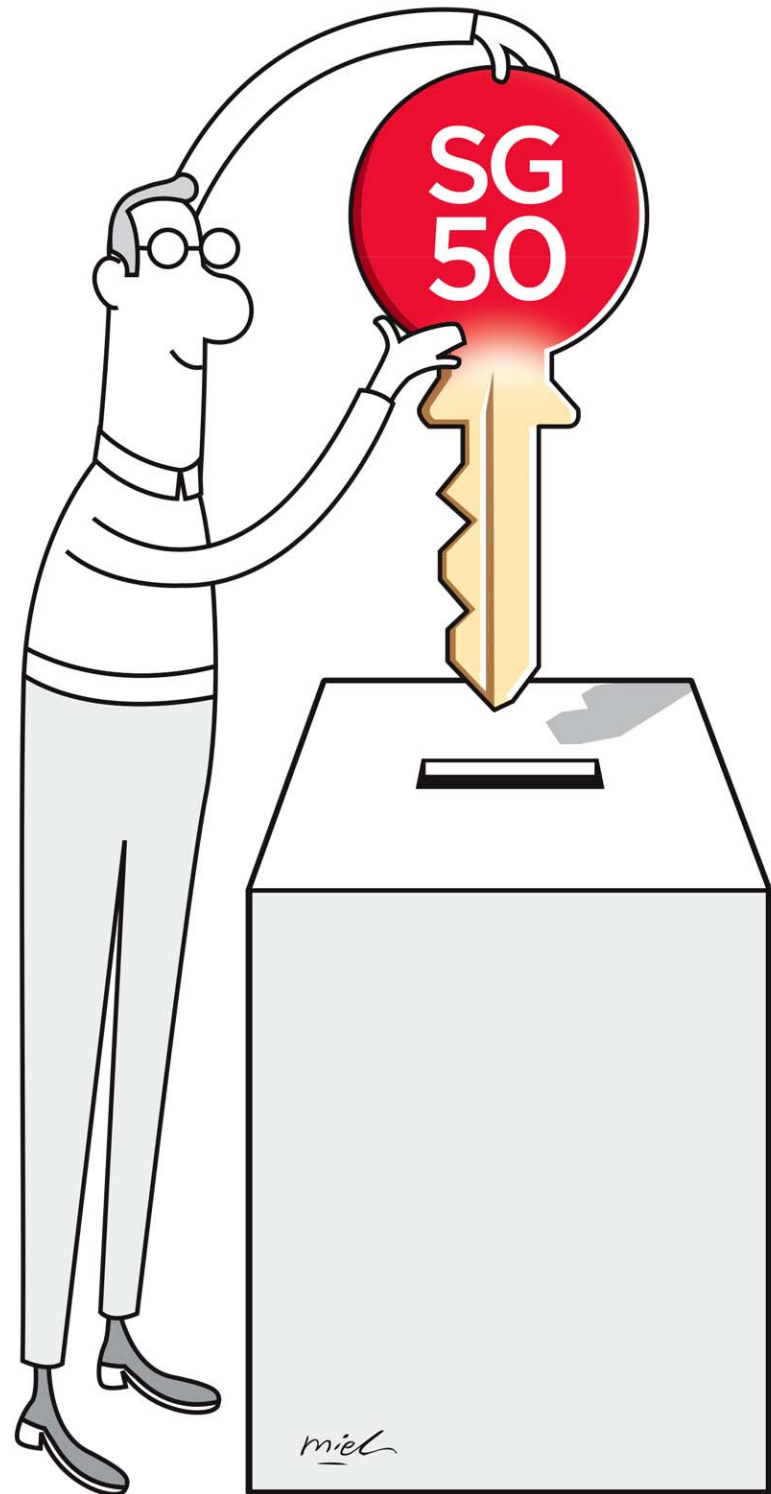
Although the WP rebutted the PAP's allegation and had, in turn, accused the PAP of bullying and using the town council system to impede the progress of the opposition, the exchange left some voters in doubt about the competence and integrity of the WP. This factor could have explained the loss of Punggol East, the drop in the support for the WP in Hougang and Aljunied GRC, and its failure to capture East Coast GRC and Fengshan SMC.

Going forward, it is important for the WP to clear its name, and to restore the electorate's faith in its competence and integrity.

PAP'S ELECTORAL STRATEGY

Eighth, the PAP did a better job managing the electoral campaign this year than in 2011.

PAP organising secretary Ng Eng Hen proved to be a capable campaign manager. Although the PAP was outgunned by the opposition in the staging of rallies, it devoted more manpower and resources to door-to-door campaigning and retail diplomacy. The party also decided to capitalise on the popularity of PM Lee by putting up his poster



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in every constituency.

It was like a referendum on him, and it could have backfired. Fortunately for the PAP, the strategy seemed to have paid off.

AN INSECURE WORLD

Ninth, the sentiments of the electorate have always been affected by the external environment. The 2001 GE is a case in point.

Following the Sept 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the electorate rallied to the PAP, which has a good track record of keeping peace at home, and a strong defence against any external threat. In that election, the PAP's popular vote was 75.3 per cent.

In this election, the PAP's narrative about the terrorist threat from ISIS and the uncertain global economy worked to its advantage.

VOICE OF REASON

Tenth, I am glad that the PAP leader whose team scored the highest popular vote of 79 per cent was Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. He was always calm and measured. He never uttered an insult or a threat.

Instead, he explained the PAP's policies and rebutted the alternatives put forward by the opposition in a clear and rational way. He was intellectually brilliant but came across as humble and open-minded.

I hope other politicians would seek to emulate him.

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