

TIME FOR OPPOSITION PARTIES TO REFLECT ON WHAT VOTERS TRULY WANT

Wither the Opposition: A Sisyphean future?

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The resounding People's Action Party (PAP) landslide in the General Election (GE) — which surprised many — must have given the Opposition camp reasons to worry.

Not only was the Opposition's combined vote share diminished by almost 10 percentage points, the main Opposition Workers' Party (WP) lost one of its seven seats and its seemingly impregnable fortress — Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) — was won by only the slimmest of margins.

However, far from being despondent, the Opposition can still continue to be a relevant fixture in Singapore's political landscape for some years to come. But the parties will have to reinvent and revamp to ensure their continued existence.

NEW NORMAL OR JUST NORMAL?

In GE2011, when the tide turned towards the Opposition with the WP breaking a psychological barrier by winning a GRC — once considered unthinkable — Singapore was said to

have entered a “new normal”.

It was seen as the electorate having a stronger desire for political plurality, after years of living with one-party rule. This sentiment gained ground with each subsequent election — the Presidential Election, Hougang by-election and Punggol East by-election.

This could have led to a pervasive sense that while the ruling PAP has been performing well, some effective Opposition was still needed to produce even better policies and politics.

But the GE2015 results give reason for reflection: Did Singapore enter a new normal after GE2011 or was it just a blip?

The Opposition will need to assess the mood on the ground. If indeed GE2011 was a blip and GE2015 is the normal, then it would struggle for a reason to survive. It would be tough to engage an electorate that is comfortable with a dominant PAP that is responsive — as has been the case in the past four years. The PAP has made major changes to address hot-button policies such as housing and immigration.

If, however, GE2015 is the blip in this new normal politics, then there is more room for the Opposition to operate. Hence, it is still plausible to see the evolution of a “one-and-a-half” party system and a fully functioning two-

party system in future.

In its post-mortem of this election, the Opposition will need to analyse why Singaporeans' supposedly stronger desire for Opposition did not translate into votes. There have been many reasons cited, from the euphoria of SG50 to the death of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, as well as fear, which tipped the scales in favour of the PAP.

THE FEAR FACTOR

In GE2011, WP chief Low Thia Kiang created an “emotional dilemma” — in the words of then PAP Minister George Yeo — for voters. Mr Low told Singaporeans to vote for the Opposition or risk not having any in Parliament, as both he and Mr Chiam See Tong — the only two Opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) — had stepped out of their single-seat wards to contest a GRC.

In a way, Mr Low put some fear into voters of the possibility of having an all-white Parliament. Coupled with the palpable anger of the people over policy missteps by the PAP, voters responded by adding some blue in the mix, electing six WP MPs.

This time around, the fear has reversed, with people fearful that the PAP would not form government as the Opposition contested all 89 seats

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for the first time since Independence, and the Opposition appeared more confident, with the WP urging voters to elect 20 Opposition MPs.

“One of the things that did loom in people's minds is that, for the first time, all 89 seats were contested. Perhaps, some people did feel there was some risk ... The PAP might be dislodged as a government,” said WP chairman Sylvia Lim after the polls.

“There is a perception that the Opposition movement is growing strong, and there could have been a pushback on that because people still feel comfortable with the PAP as a government.” If that is the case, how should the Opposition strategise for the next electoral battle?

By and large, Opposition parties can no longer campaign on the overly touted slogan of acting as “checks and balances” in Parliament. They now have to be seen to offer slightly new and fresh ideological and political platforms that are as equally relevant and feasible as those proposed by the PAP Government, while also projecting a more humane and caring persona to the populace.

Needless to say, existing Opposition MPs must continue to improve their service in their present wards



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and perform even better in Parliament — failing which, the continuing widespread public desire to see more, and more credible, Opposition voices in the legislature could dissipate.

If this were to happen, not only will their current MP positions be at stake, both good potential recruits in particular and the electorate as a whole will also see little interest, what more added value, in having a more competitive parliamentary politics in this country.

FUTURE OF OPPOSITION

It appears that only the WP is worthy of commanding the leadership of the Opposition camp. Realistically, the many small, fringe parties without either brand names or high-profile, charismatic leaders cannot survive, let alone succeed in Singapore.

The recent GE has shown that the larger the numbers of Opposition parties, the greater the propensity for their lack of collaboration, if not disunity. Hence, for now, it appears that only the WP — and to a certain extent the

Singapore Democratic Party — could proceed to reinvent themselves. This they could do by offering the following: Alternative but feasible ideologies and party platforms, continuing to recruit successful individuals with qualified credentials and adopting centre-left politics to match the PAP's recent bent.

Obviously, these will not be easy, since Singapore's size, geopolitical environment, heavy dependence on economic survival, among others, limit their desire to be seen as different from what the PAP itself has succeeded in doing.

Admittedly, the road ahead will be bumpy given the PAP's wide resources, experience and continuing grip of the key political institutions of the state, such as the bureaucracy, grassroots organisations, trade unions and mass media. But the Opposition's future existence and role are not necessarily "Sisyphean".

In fact, if the parties could repair their dented ship and steer the stern to a clearer and more solid course, the recent big pendulum swing in favour of the PAP, may still, with some luck, move towards their side.