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Singapore's GE 2015: Not Quite a Watershed Election

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

The coming general election could usher in a major leadership change for Singapore but even with a strong PAP victory it will not be a watershed election.

Commentary

WILL THE general election widely expected next month be a watershed event that changes the politics or political direction of the country? While the 2011 election was path-breaking in denting the dominance of the ruling People's Action Party, there was more continuity than a major shift in the numerical makeup of the Parliament. The PAP still controlled 93 percent of the seats and Singapore's political course was not altered. The parliamentary decibel level increased but not its direction.

The first watershed election was in 1963 just after Singapore joined Malaysia. The 1963 election was about a clash of ideas about Singapore's future direction and the leaders behind them. The non-communist PAP won 37 of the 51 seats while garnering only 47 percent of the electoral votes. It entrenched the PAP and sidelined the Barisan Sosialis and the opposition in general for the next 50 years. The 2015 general election will be noteworthy for a number of reasons.

Post-Lee Kuan Yew Singapore and new generations

From the 1959 general election to 2011 Lee Kuan Yew has been the leading protagonist, capturing the imagination of the voters bar none. This situation changed with the passing of the independent nation's founding prime minister. For the first time, the PAP and the nation are without the anchor personality that has shaped the republic's politics for more than 50 years. The PAP, the opposition parties and the Singapore electorate have never faced such a situation.

This election marks the passing of two political generations - that of Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong even though the latter will be contesting in the Marine Parade group constituency. Political power is currently in the hands of the third and fourth generation leaders led by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This election will introduce the fourth and fifth generations and is also about passing the baton from PM Lee to the next leader. A failure to signal who will helm Singapore's politics after Lee Hsien Loong could call into question the future of the PAP, and possibly the nation.

Minister for Law and Minister for Foreign Affairs, K. Shanmugam, has noted that hardly any political party has remained in power for more than 70 years. Can the PAP confound this seven decade jinx? For this, it will need at least 10 years for the new leader of the PAP to consolidate himself in the party and win public support. As no Prime Minister-in-waiting is currently discernible, will the time frame be fast-forwarded after the coming GE?

This election will see the largest number of voters entering the fray. Compared to the 2,350,257 registered voters in February 2011, there are 2,460,977 registered voters today, an increase of 4.7 percent. Most of them are young first-time voters. They will be game changers, especially in marginal seats. This election will also see the largest number of electoral wards, 89. There is one more single member constituency (SMC), (13) and Group Representation Constituency (GRC) (16) compared to the last GE but more four-man GRCs, with all seats being contested. The PAP is contesting all constituencies, as expected.

Despite difficult relations among the opposition parties, three-cornered fights have been averted. There appears to be opposition unity in contesting against the PAP. Even more interesting, the Singapore People's Party (SPP) of opposition veteran Chiam See Tong and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have been able to jointly contest a GRC under a single party banner - something never seen in the past. However the Workers' Party (WP) has thrown in its hat for 28 wards while defending the constituencies it holds.

Issues Galore - exploit or manage?

The coming election will also be one of the most competitive in recent years. With the rise of new political leaders, two new political parties, a more discerning political generation and most importantly, issues that affect almost every political generation, this is a political contestation that will determine how dominant the PAP is and how much support the Opposition can garner.

Perennial "bread and butter" issues such as cost of living, housing, health care, education, income gap and role of foreigners are unlikely to disappear. How the PAP manages them and how the Opposition exploits them is key. If issues remain local in nature, then the Opposition will be contained. But if national issues take centre stage as happened in 2011, then the PAP's electoral votes could fall below 60 percent and the Opposition presence increased. But there is no question that the PAP will be returned as the government.

The ruling party will be advantaged by global developments that temper public anger against the government. With the global economy undergoing tectonics shifts, especially in Europe, United States, China and India, and uncertain political developments in Malaysia and Indonesia, the tried and tested steady hand of the PAP will be favoured, to the disadvantage of the Opposition.

2015 - a watershed election?

The PAP has provided effective governance for more than 50 years, since 1965, making Singapore a first-world state. Much progress has been made on issues of political accountability and transparency, freedoms and shared development, including welfare schemes to assist the under-privileged. Yet, an effective Opposition is desired by the electorate as a check and balance to the PAP, and to enhance Singapore's international image.

While PAP has cemented its relationship with the electorate, especially with the SG50 anniversary celebrations, the party will reap the public goodwill for a job well-done. There will be public sympathy at the passing of Lee Kuan Yew who would have been 92 on 16 September 2015. The changed political terrain, new leaders, wide-ranging challenges of a developed society and matured electorate's mindset have provided the sinews for a sea change to occur.

This election will decide how Singapore innovates politically and economically through greater democratic space and welfare programmes that will set the road ahead for the next 50 years. Most importantly, it will be a signpost as to who is likely to be the PM-in-waiting for a state where leadership is the key driver of politics and development.

Bilveer Singh, an Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore, is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also the current President, Political Science Association, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg