

The 2015 general election and Singapore's political forecast : white clouds, blue skies

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The 2015 General Election and Singapore's Political Forecast

White Clouds, Blue Skies

ABSTRACT

The People's Action Party's unexpectedly strong win in Singapore's September 2015 general election illuminates the dynamics of opposition under electoral authoritarianism. The conduct and outcome of the election raise questions not just of why the much-hyped opposition efforts fizzled, but also of the implications for Singapore politics, moving forward.

KEYWORDS: Singapore, electoral authoritarianism, elections, People's Action Party, opposition politics

THAT THE PERENNIALY RULING PEOPLE'S ACTION PARTY (PAP) would win Singapore's September 2015 general election, the country's twelfth since independence in 1965, was a foregone conclusion. Even the most ambitious and promising opposition parties aspired not to form the government but to be a larger, more effective, yet "responsible" parliamentary opposition. Regardless, that the PAP not only won back one of the mere seven seats held by the opposition but also boosted its share of the popular vote by nearly 10 percentage points, to around 70%, surprised even the ruling party. Until

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polling day, parties on both sides, observers, and even supposedly astute bookmakers had assumed that the PAP would lose a few more seats. Indeed, opposition gains in 2011 had left many observers predicting a near-inexorable shift toward a more liberal, two-party system to supplant Singapore's long-standing dominant-party, hybrid system.

The conduct and outcome of the election raise questions not just of why the much-hyped challenge fizzled, but also of the implications for Singapore's political trajectory. While the opposition performed worse this time than in 2011, its salience cannot be read only from polling results. The different approaches and results across opposition parties offer insight into what works for would-be challengers, however hamstrung by internal disorganization, limited resources, and structural hurdles. More important, these polls illuminate the roles political opposition plays in a stable hybrid system: the extent to which a vocal opposition may push the dominant party to reform (or at least to justify its policy choices better) despite structural constraints; whether voters prioritize "voice" beyond effective policy outcomes; how much personality matters amid a substantially partisan vote; what tools and niches challengers can exploit in pressing their case; and how both sides extend their reach beyond core supporters to a growing mass of swing voters or those of unknown sympathies. As an opposition Workers' Party (WP) campaign metaphor suggested, referring to the WP's signature blue and the PAP's white, voters choose between "blue sky" and shape-shifting "white clouds." Even should the clouds block out the blue, both share space in Singapore's electoral firmament.¹

CONDUCT AND RESULTS OF THE ELECTION

The defining features of hybrid, or electoral authoritarian, regimes are curbs on civil liberties and skewed elections—in Schedler's terms, kinks or discontinuities in the "chain of democratic choice."² The conjunction of these dimensions is readily apparent in Singaporean elections. The voting process itself is above reproach, although opposition parties and the human rights

1. Sylvia Lim, WP rally speech, September 4, 2015, <<http://www.wp.sg/sylvia-lims-rally-speech-yishun-stadium-rally-4-sep/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

2. Andreas Schedler, "The Menu of Manipulation," *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (April 2002), pp. 36–50; see also Larry Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (April 2002), pp. 21–35.

group Maruah (Dignity)³ have found it necessary to persuade skeptical voters that their vote *is* secret, thanks to the use of serial numbers on ballot papers. Campaigns are tightly regulated, too, to be rigorously “fair”: for instance, each party is allotted time proportionate to its number of candidates for televised “party political broadcasts,” and strict rules govern how many posters and banners each candidate or party may display.⁴

Regardless, the opposition faces hurdles. Most obviously, it is only during the official campaign period, constitutionally mandated to be between nine and 56 days, that rallies and open campaigning are allowed. The 2015 campaign lasted only 10 days, including an eerily silent “cooling-off day” introduced in 2011, when campaigning is prohibited. Even then, precise parameters surround the methods of canvassing that are permissible as well as the hours and venues of rallies (7–10 PM, except for two downtown noon rallies; for these, parties chose venues by lot, one day in advance). Rules on online campaign efforts have been progressively loosened, yet curbs persist on political videos, and the PAP’s control of mainstream media magnifies its advantage.

A mixture of multimember group representation constituencies (GRCs) and single member constituencies (SMCs), whose composition and boundaries shift with each election, ensures minority representation; each GRC must include at least one member from among the minority groups that comprise about one-quarter of Singapore’s population. GRCs, however, complicate competition for opposition parties. Not only must the party come up with a full slate of plausible candidates but also each candidate pays a steep deposit, SG\$ 14,500 (US\$ 10,422) this year, which is forfeited should the candidate poll below 12.5% of votes. (Only the two independents who ran in 2015 lost their deposits, and the Reform Party squeaked through with 12.7% in one SMC.)

Nevertheless, for the first time since independence, all parliamentary seats were contested: 13 SMCs and 16 GRCs, each with between four and six members, for a total of 89 seats. Complementing these elected MPs are appointed non-constituency members of parliament (“best losers” from the opposition; the Elections Department invites those candidates who secured

3. Maruah, “Vote Wisely. Vote without Fear. The Vote Is Secret,” September 6, 2015, <<http://maruah.org/2015/09/06/vote-wisely-vote-without-fear-the-vote-is-secret/>>, accessed October 26, 2015.

4. The Singapore Elections Department website enumerates these guidelines in a downloadable handbook: <http://www.eld.gov.sg/pdf/GE2015/Candidate%20Handbook%20for%20Parliamentary%20Election%202015_1.pdf>, accessed October 25, 2015.

the highest shares of popular votes, but not enough to win, to join the parliament), an innovation introduced in 1984 to ensure a minimum number of non-PAP MPs (currently nine). (Up to nine nominated members of parliament, drawn from key societal sectors rather than political parties, complete the mix.)

More parties than usual contested in 2015, including two parties formed since the last election. Part of the reason for the PAP's greater vote share was simply that some seats that had been walkovers previously (and hence not included in the party's vote tally), or that were not claimed by more established opposition parties, were now contested by weaker parties seeking an available niche. The PAP's especially strong results in such seats—as high as 79% in five-member Jurong and six-member Ang Mo Kio, and 78% in previously uncontested five-member Tanjong Pagar (Lee Kuan Yew's former constituency)—increased the PAP's overall average.

Lastly, the precise date of the elections is up to the prime minister, who skillfully surfs the political waves. Speculation had been rife that the polls might be in September during school holidays—shortly after SG50, the gala fiftieth anniversary of Singapore's independence, and a mere six months after Lee Kuan Yew's demise, which galvanized nationalist sentiment. Polling day is typically a Saturday, but this time it was set for a Friday. Explanations vary, from claims that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Lee Kuan Yew's son) timed the polls to fall at the very end of the Hungry Ghost Festival, so his father could watch over them; to the possibility that the infamous 9/11 date would remind Singaporeans who could best protect them in troubled times; to suggestions that the PAP wanted voters to be grateful for an extra public holiday, and perhaps hoped some share of opposition-leaning voters might leave town for the long weekend (which excuses citizens from mandatory voting).

Yet this background does more to explain the PAP's endemic strength than to explain why its standing *improved*. Why was the PAP vote share higher this time? The reasons fall into three broad categories: perceptual effects, material lures, and the quality and nature of competition.

Perceptual Effects

However routine the PAP's win was, these elections transpired against a somewhat changed electoral backdrop. The first two perceptual factors, and the

most endemic, make the PAP's gains all the more surprising; the others tip the scales toward the PAP.

Perhaps most germane for politics going forward, an increasingly lively online discourse about party and policy alternatives fed into exuberant offline, election-period debate. As in 2011, tens of thousands attended opposition rallies, though this time, PAP rallies also drew larger-than-expected crowds. Even if most voters still ultimately stick with the PAP, such participation signals awareness of the politics behind policy choices—that there is not just one “correct” policy out there—and a desire to hear what each party has to offer. Without Lee Kuan Yew's personal cachet, this inquisitive discordance could increasingly spill over into the PAP itself, eroding the party's cohesiveness.⁵

Second, Singapore's much-bewailed “climate of fear” has diminished. Although no doubt some 2015 voters still worried that their vote might be known, attending opposition rallies was a festive, not furtive, affair. While most rally-goers eschewed party swag, a significant number purchased or brought inflatable hammers (emblem of the WP), “Chiam-pion” T-shirts (honoring Chiam See Tong, leader of the Singapore People's Party, SPP), Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) “Danny the Democracy Bear” stuffed toys, and party flags, newsletters, and umbrellas. (Sighted at a PAP rally, too, was an enormous stuffed carrot, poking fun at the party's many lures.) While no party claims to “oppose for the sake of opposing”—an oft-heard epithet in 2011—a significant share of voters do clearly want an opposition voice in parliament, to offer alternatives and keep the PAP in line. A survey immediately following that year's general election found the “need for different views in Parliament” to be one of voters' top five issues; 84% of respondents named this an important or very important issue for them.⁶

On the other hand, Prime Minister Lee timed the elections well. The “SG50 effect”—the afterglow of Independence Day celebrations, invoked through frequent references to the PAP's having steered Singapore from “mudflats into a metropolis” or “from Third World to First”⁷—helped the

5. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.

6. Institute of Policy Studies, “POPS (4): IPS Post Election Survey 2011,” updated September 2012, slide 17, <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/POPS-4_May-11_slides1.pdf>, accessed October 25, 2015.

7. PAP Manifesto 2015, “With You for You for Singapore,” p. 5, <<https://www.pap.org.sg/Manifesto>> (accessed October 26, 2015)—this was repeated throughout campaign speeches and materials.

PAP, however heavy-handed the means. The government splashed out, too, with an S\$9 million (US\$ 6.47 million) SG50 “celebration fund.”⁸

Importantly, and in a departure from usual practice, religious networks also mobilized for SG50, in politically significant ways. Most notably, the National Council of Churches in Singapore and the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore co-organized the Jubilee Day of Prayer event, Singapore’s largest-ever gathering of Protestant Christians. It was attended by 51,000 people, who, with hands raised, sang a “prayer song” to the prime minister, who was present.⁹ LoveSingapore, another influential network of Protestant pastors and church ministry groups involved in organizing the event, published a widely used “prayer guide” booklet, which exhorted believers to “honour God by honouring Mr Lee Kuan Yew” and admonished believers, “Have you taken your Founding Father [Lee Kuan Yew] for granted? Time to soften your heart. Acknowledge that God has blessed us with a great nation-builder we did not deserve.”¹⁰ That same weekend, Catholic Singaporeans had their own Joy SG50 Thanksgiving Mass, drawing around 10,000 devotees.¹¹

One month later, Muslims under a committee called SG50Kita (Our SG50) organized a National Day of Observance following a spate of community service activities.¹² Prime Minister Lee also joined the Catholic and the Muslim events. Election machineries seem to have unofficially and somewhat surreptitiously activated conservative Protestant and Catholic networks during the campaign, by disseminating text messages alleging opposition party support for gay rights and urging loyalty to the PAP. (In fact, no opposition party has ever asserted such support for gay rights, whereas Lee Kuan Yew publicly espoused surprisingly liberal views on homosexuality.)

The effect of Lee Kuan Yew’s death—widely dubbed the “LKY effect”—was widely touted as having moved Singaporeans to rally behind the party of

8. Monica Kotwani, “SG50 Celebration Fund Almost Doubled with S\$4m Cash Injection: Lawrence Wong,” *Channel News Asia* (Singapore), May 13, 2014, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/sg50-celebration-fund/t843898.html>>, accessed October 3, 2015.

9. Charissa Yong, “51,000 Christians Gather at Sports Hub to Mark SG50; PM Lee Thanks Community for Helping Build S’pore,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), July 5, 2015, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/51000-christians-gather-at-sports-hub-to-mark-sg50-pm-lee-thanks-community-for-helping>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

10. Terry Xu, “Honour God by Honouring Mr Lee Kuan Yew,” *Online Citizen* (Singapore), July 29, 2015, <<http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/07/honour-god-by-honouring-mr-lee-kuan-yew/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

11. <<http://sg50.catholic.org.sg/joy-sg50-event/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

12. <<http://sg50kita.com>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

the nation's recently departed "founding father" at election time. Singaporeans' outpouring of grief during the week of national mourning immediately after Lee's death was spontaneous, by most accounts. However, the PAP government clearly orchestrated the sustained memorialization of Singapore's first prime minister throughout the year, to its own benefit.¹³ Nevertheless, it has been hard to quantify the impact of the "LKY effect" on the general election results. Comparisons between Lee's generation of leaders, who have attained near-superhuman status through continuous adulation in mainstream media, and the current slate of PAP leaders may summon up a glorious legacy, but can also backfire, by highlighting a decline in the quality of PAP leadership over the generations. Hence, the opposition periodically plays up that comparison.

Lastly, the PAP increasingly stirred up Singaporeans' insecurities as the campaign proceeded. As neighboring Malaysia floundered amid a massive corruption scandal, racial provocations, and a sinking ringgit; haze from unchecked land-clearing burns in Indonesia choked Singaporeans; twin bombings rattled Thailand, still under martial law; and the "Islamic State" wreaked havoc in Syria, PAP rally speeches reminded voters that Singapore is a vulnerable "little red dot" in a dubious neighborhood. Senior PAP leaders warned of the implications of the (admittedly unrealistic) scenario of the party's winning insufficient seats to form a government.¹⁴ One PAP minister raised hackles among even many Singaporean listeners by remarking how "lucky" he felt to have been born in Singapore rather than Malaysia or China, sparking sharp criticism from Malaysian government officials.¹⁵ All this culminated in the PAP's afternoon rally in the central business district on September 8, 2015, at which Prime Minister Lee noted that "Polling Day,

13. Terence Lee, "The Pragmatics of Change: Singapore's 2015 General Election," in *Change in Voting: Singapore's 2015 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin Y. L. Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), p. 13.

14. Khaw Boon Wan, PAP rally speech, September 7, 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEC2g-meJkE>>, accessed October 25, 2015; Salma Khalik and Tham Yuen-C, "No Guarantee PAP Will Be in Government after Polls: Khaw Boon Wan," *Straits Times* (Singapore), September 8, 2015, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/no-guarantee-pap-will-be-in-government-after-polls-khaw-boon-wan>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

15. "S'pore Minister Now Says Didn't Meant to Insult M'sia, China," *Malaysiakini* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia), September 5, 2015, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/311239>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

it so happens, is 9/11, just to remind ourselves.”¹⁶ (Some listeners found the reminder to be in poor taste.)

Opposition parties had less to say about security: as the party with foreign and defense policy experience, not to mention a substantial complement of candidates with military backgrounds, the PAP easily wins on that front.

Material Lures

However important this normative backdrop, material appeals dominated campaign rhetoric and likely swayed the most votes. As the party in power since independence, the PAP purposefully blurs the line between what comes from the party and what comes from the state. One elderly PAP supporter, for instance, reminisced in a rally speech about collection of night soil (human manure) in the Singapore of his youth, before modern sanitation, and cautioned voters not to let “the country return to the days of the bucket” by voting opposition.¹⁷

The PAP downplayed messages this time that voters in wards won by the opposition would “pay a price” and “repent,”¹⁸ but doubts persist. Opposition candidates acknowledged that their constituencies lose out on supplemental grants for improvements. The WP’s Pritam Singh explained in a rally speech, for instance, that his party’s Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) had been allocated no Community Improvement Projects Committee grants since the 2011 elections; Aljunied alone had received about SG\$ 4 million (US\$ 2.88 million) per year for each of the three preceding years under the PAP.¹⁹ Such considerations might have been particularly salient in former SPP stronghold Potong Pasir, in the midst of major estate upgrading works since the PAP won it back in 2011.

16. Nur Asyiqin and Mohamad Salleh, “S’pore Succeeds by Staying United: PM,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), September 9, 2015, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-succeeds-by-staying-united-pm>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

17. Lim Chye Hin, PAP rally speech, September 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XClcJQ_Sg5o>, accessed October 3, 2015.

18. Jeffrey Oon, “Aljunied Voters Will Regret Choosing WP,” Yahoo! News, April 30, 2011, <<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/aljunied-voters-will-regret-choosing-wp—mm-lee.html>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

19. Pritam Singh, WP rally speech, September 5, 2015, <<http://www.wp.sg/pritam-singhs-rally-speech-punggol-field-walk-rally-5-sep/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

Still, that the PAP softened its prior messages of contingency—that estate upgrading and other improvements would depend on votes delivered—indicates a move away from clientelism (a.k.a. patronage) in a technical sense,²⁰ in favor of programmatic distribution. (This same theme, complete with equivocal framing, loomed large in the first post-election by-election, in Bukit Batok in May 2016: the PAP candidate's promise of an SG\$ 1.9 million [US\$ 1.37 million] upgrading plan for the constituency likely factored in his win—even though, eschewing a “carrot and stick” message, the candidate then insisted the funds were not contingent on his election.²¹)

While voters *are*, on the whole, grateful to the PAP for decades of competent administration—and do tend to presume that all progress is the PAP's doing²²—much the same bread-and-butter issues as in 2011 rankled in 2015. The most visceral of these was a government white paper setting a target population of 6.9 million (from 5.5 million in 2015), to be achieved regardless of Singapore's low birth rate. Opposition parties, especially smaller parties like Singaporeans First (SingFirst) and the Reform Party, highlighted public aggravation with overcrowding and competition for jobs due to an immigration-dependent growth strategy. (Even some PAP backbenchers had expressed reservations regarding the white paper.) Linked with such concerns were the rising cost of living and socioeconomic inequality, as well as more specific worries over provisions related to the Central Provident Fund (a mandatory pension scheme), healthcare costs, and Housing Development Board (public housing) estates. Rally-goers responded enthusiastically to opposition policy alternatives, but most of these only fine-tuned existing PAP frameworks—nor did they translate into many votes.

After its first loss of a GRC, in 2011, the PAP had tacked leftward, offering a garden of carrots to disgruntled voters to woo back support. (“We are not rabbits!” became an opposition battle-cry.) The PAP decried what it termed opposition challengers’ “populist” appeals, instead touting its own embrace

20. Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco, 2013, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press), Figure 1.1.

21. “5 Key Insights from the Bukit Batok By-Election,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), May 15, 2016, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/5-key-insights-from-the-bukit-batok-by-election>>, accessed May 18, 2016.

22. See e.g. Rujun Shen, “Singapore’s Ruling Party Contends with New Voting Majority,” Reuters, July 27, 2015, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/singapore-politics-idUSL3N1032GN20150727>>.

of “unpopular” policies for the greater good. But in fact the PAP government had dispensed billions of dollars’ worth of benefits, from healthcare subsidies to tax rebates to education and training credits to childcare discounts to straight-out bonuses.²³ The biggest handout was an SG\$ 8 billion (US\$ 5.75 billion) Pioneer Generation Package offering healthcare subsidies, which surely appeased many elderly voters. But more trivial goodies like SG50 “funpacks” of toys, snacks, and other trinkets, distributed personally to residents by PAP MPs, may have helped spread goodwill across voting cohorts.

Meanwhile, the fact that since 1988 MPs have served simultaneously as heads of town councils—Singapore has no local council elections—encouraged a focus on ultra-local considerations rather than national policies. In particular, the media and PAP rhetoric emphasized alleged financial mismanagement in the WP’s AHPETC. The WP did its best to answer the charges and retool its processes, and voters in that area seemed less perturbed than those outside, yet the attacks almost certainly cost the WP votes. (Its margins were lower in Hougang than they had been in 2011 and a 2012 by-election, and lower in Aljunied than they had been in 2011; and it lost Punggol East, won in a 2013 by-election.)

This factor also helps explain some of the disparity in outcomes across opposition parties: not all have equal wherewithal to run a town council. Should the party find no takers for its management contracts, or discover that diseconomies of scale render those services unaffordable, the party itself may need to play a greater role in managing the town—as the WP ended up doing. At the same time, opposition MPs are shut out of the People’s Association (PA) grassroots. The PA is technically a nonpartisan statutory board, yet its organizations are widely known to support the PAP. Its efforts are critical to the PAP’s monitoring estates and sustaining support; the PAP appoints a “grassroots adviser” to assume the role normally granted to the local MP in opposition-held wards. PAP incumbents touted their record of effective town management, notwithstanding reported irregularities, together with the personal outreach they and the PA provide.

23. For a full accounting see Tan Tarn How, “Goodies Offered before GE2015 a Likely Vote Swinger Factor,” *Mothership.sg*, September 16, 2015, <<http://mothership.sg/2015/09/goodies-offered-before-ge2015-a-likely-vote-swing-factor/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

Quality and Nature of Competition

Specific capabilities aside, no opposition party can match the PAP's level of institutionalization: its "systemness," or coherent organization, and "reification," or presence in the public imagination, in particular.²⁴ Arguably only the WP—the sole opposition party to win seats in 2011 or 2015—and the long-established but currently less successful SDP can claim to be meaningfully institutionalized. Other opposition parties are either heavily personality-oriented (SPP, Reform Party), even if not new to the scene, or generally inchoate. Frequent party-hopping among the latter batch of parties further impedes establishment of a clear mission and vision; the National Solidarity Party (NSP), high-performing in 2011 but now perilously weak, took the worst hit this time.

Coordination among parties remains a challenge. The opposition as a whole was in greater disarray in 2015, both internally and across parties, than on the eve of the 2011 elections. Not only is the opposition landscape organizationally and ideologically hazy, but acrimony among opposition parties wrangling over constituencies to contest was clearly evident—the unintended result of there being more aspiring candidates and political parties than ever before. While the parties have a decades-long tradition of meeting on the eve of elections to divide up the seats, so as to minimize multi-cornered fights, 2015's horse-trading talks were particularly bitter and prolonged; sources present primarily blamed personality clashes. Yet differing perceptions of relative entitlement or claims also impeded coordination—for example, the considerable wrangling between the WP and the NSP (and even between different factions in the NSP) over the MacPherson SMC, given the perceived weak prospects of PAP incumbent Tin Pei Ling (who ultimately performed well). The WP declined even to attend beyond the first meeting—and indeed, some commentators deemed the WP sufficiently in its own league to be justified in breaking with tradition.²⁵

Three factors in particular sustain this general weakness: scarcity of funds, tools for mobilization, and external networks.

24. Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, "Party Institutionalization in New Democracies," *Party Politics* 8:1 (2002), pp. 5–29 (especially pp. 13–14).

25. Au Waipang, "General Election 2015: Looking Back, Looking Forward, Part 1," *Yawning Bread*, September 21, 2015, <<https://yawningbread.wordpress.com/2015/09/21/general-election-2015-looking-back-looking-forward-part-1/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

The staple funding for political parties tends to come from contributions from their elected MPs—usually around 10% of their annual allowance (currently SG\$ 192,000, or US\$ 138,000). Unlike the PAP, which invariably holds over 90% of parliamentary seats, opposition parties have few elected MPs, if any; their tithes thus tally to a fraction of the PAP's. Opposition parties therefore rely primarily on small-scale fundraising: donations of under SG\$ 5,000 (US\$ 3,594), since larger contributions cannot be anonymous (the bureaucratic process of declaring a donation tends to dissuade those inclined to donate more), as well as proceeds from sales of newsletters, party paraphernalia, dinner tickets, and the like. These funds also go toward the rental of office space and election campaign expenses. Opposition parties in Singapore rarely keep professional staff, relying instead on volunteers and members. Only the SDP had recently hired a staff member: one "secretariat manager."

The PAP, on the other hand, as opposition parties frequently complain, can rely on well-resourced grassroots organizations of the People's Association, including Residents' Committees and Citizens' Consultative Committees. (This advantage may be diminishing, as young people are less inclined toward these organizations, while new immigrants are increasingly drawn to them, both for expected perks, and as a way to integrate and secure a niche in Singapore society.²⁶) For instance, the grassroots adviser for the Residents' Committees and Citizens' Consultative Committee in each constituency is always the local PAP MP (or in opposition-held constituencies, the prospective PAP candidate). This grassroots adviser effectively has powers of approval over the disbursement of certain government funds for municipal infrastructure and recreational facilities, including in opposition wards.

Spending by all parties during election campaigns in Singapore tends to be low by international standards. Most candidates stay well below the current legal limit of SG\$ 4 (US\$ 2.88) per elector in a constituency, up from SG\$ 3.50 (US\$ 2.53) in 2011. The only ambiguous expenses in 2015 were for such materials as the posters seen island-wide, featuring the prime minister, as well as the glossy PAP manifestos that all voters received in the mail; it is not clear whether those costs were included within the spending cap. In 2011, the PAP averaged SG\$ 1.79 (US\$ 1.29) per voter; the opposition averaged SG\$ 0.57 (US\$ 0.41), for a grand total, including both PAP and opposition spending,

26. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for noting this trend; see e.g. Leong Wee Keat, "Cap on PRs Leads to Waitlist at Grassroots," *Today* (Singapore), December 7, 2009, p. 1.

of SG\$ 5.5 million (US\$ 3.95 million).²⁷ Total spending increased to SG\$ 7.1 million (US\$ 5.14 million) in 2015. Three-fourths of this was by the PAP—SG\$ 2.16 (US\$ 1.56) per voter, versus SG\$ 0.73 (US\$ 0.53) by the combined opposition. Even the highest-spending PAP candidate stayed well under the per-voter limit, at SG\$ 2.97 (US\$ 2.15).²⁸ While candidates are required to file campaign expense reports—viewable at the Elections Department for a small fee—details of party financing are not otherwise publicized. Moreover, the PA grassroots bodies organize community activities in public housing estates in each constituency, including during campaign periods (even if incidentally), which help bolster support.

Not wanting to declare their candidates too early, lest the PAP undercut their selections, opposition parties tend to wait until elections have been called to print campaign materials, requiring a sudden rush. Likewise, without knowing the precise date of elections, they cannot hire necessary campaign equipment until the last minute, and may then find only scarce or low-quality supplies. The SDP found itself competing with other parties to rent vehicles, for instance, despite a prior contract. Other parties complained that the overlap with the month-long Chinese-community Hungry Ghost Festival entailed a scarcity of vehicles and sound stages. Nor can opposition parties, with the possible exception of the WP, match the PAP's ranks of ground staff and volunteers familiar with every corner of the constituency: leaflet distributors, if the party can afford them, cannot offer the same opportunity for interaction and persuasion.

The PAP also has clear advantages in terms of political mobilization. Chief among these is its hold on the mainstream media, even if online competition has pressed newspapers in particular to become somewhat more balanced. Although the conventional wisdom is that online and social media—central to opposition mobilization—have radically shifted the playing field, our observations and interviews suggest that such platforms serve more to solidify faith and confidence among core voters than to reach swing voters. Social

27. "\$5.5m spent on GE2011," *Channel News Asia* (Singapore), June 15, 2011; "Opposition Candidates File Their Election Expenses," June 13, 2011, *Channel News Asia* (Singapore) [accessed via LexisNexis].

28. "GE2015 Spending: PAP Candidates Spend \$5.3m while the Eight Opposition Parties' Expenses Totaled \$1.8m," *Straits Times*, October 29, 2015, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge2015-spending-pap-candidates-spent-53m-while-the-eight-opposition-parties-expenses>>, accessed May 18, 2016.

media also lost some of the impact it had had in 2011 due in part to a new licensing scheme introduced in 2013 by the Media Development Authority, which added onerous rules for the registration of “news sites.” Nor do opposition parties have the benefit of public opinion surveys or exit poll data to help target voter mobilization efforts. Election surveys are banned by law during the campaign period, though there are efforts to collect disaggregated data post hoc as votes are counted.

Finally, while the WP in particular has built up its counterpart to the PA grassroots (albeit without the same levels of funding and facilities), and most opposition parties welcome a rush of volunteers as elections approach, the opposition generally lacks the sorts of organic links with society that sustain the PAP. Apart from the PA, civil society organizations, including media without specific registration, are prohibited from “political” activities. What is out of bounds remains quite hazy, yet risk-averse organizations are loath to test the waters by engaging along partisan lines, even when their priorities align with an opposition party’s. The lack of a broader efflorescence of civil society in Singapore, even amid increasingly lively elections, reflects the limits of the current participatory surge in politics.

THE ROLE OF OPPOSITION IN HYBRID REGIMES

This final dimension—the nature and quality of competition—bears further analysis. The 2015 elections in Singapore not only illuminated the relative stature and capabilities of opposition parties but raised real questions about what their function is under successful electoral authoritarianism. On the whole, studies of hybrid regimes neglect to explore the challengers: the assumption seems to be that because one party is so dominant, opposition parties are substantially similar and largely insignificant. While it is true that many opposition parties’ manifestos overlapped in this case, their internal and external images, their core priorities, and their overall ideological frames varied. That Singapore voters differentiated among opposition alternatives is clear in the higher vote shares certain opposition parties achieved—and in the number of voters who spoiled their ballot (since voting is mandatory) rather than proactively support either the PAP or a weak opposition choice.²⁹

29. A look across constituencies for the percentage of spoiled votes suggests such a discriminating pattern: see “Results for General Election 2015” (third map), *The Online Citizen*, <<http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/results-for-general-election-2015/>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

Understanding why these elections matter and how the PAP is evolving as competition intensifies helps explain what is happening in Singapore. Such analysis also illuminates an important path to political change under electoral authoritarianism.

Singapore's opposition parties offered voters three frames for understanding their role, each presenting a different vision of what the opposition can and does do in such a regime. In the absence of serious public opinion polls, we rely primarily on the conduct of campaigning in rallies, via door-to-door canvassing, and on social media (as well as more surreptitious text messaging and similar efforts) to gauge what parties present and what voters want—and whether those aspirations or understandings vary by population segment.

The Opposition as Potential Government

In Singapore, the most obvious opposition strategy is the least promising: to present one's party as running to win. In 2015 only the leaders of SingFirst, former senior civil servants, were notably trying to position themselves as a government-in-waiting, however few the seats they could possibly secure. (Party leader Tan Jee Say has advocated an opposition coalition, which he would presumably head.) Yet SingFirst's results were nothing short of devastating, at 20–22% of the vote in the constituencies it contested, among the lowest of any party.

A party that seeks only a niche role cannot expect to pass its policies, given party loyalty in a parliamentary system. On the other hand, the SDP in particular stressed its set of detailed policy proposals. Hence, we might read this focus on a coherent program as akin to presenting one's party as ready to lead. The SDP, recognizing that this would not be a winning strategy, downplayed that approach, reminding rally attendees that they could only present, not hope to pass, their proposals in parliament. Still, being a “voice in parliament” without any reasonable expectation of efficacy is a difficult position to sustain.

The Opposition as Representing Marginalized Interests

If not as an alternative government, opposition parties might offer themselves as representatives of those citizens marginalized under dominant-party priorities. We might, for instance, envision a future party focused on the interests of

the growing mass of “new citizens,” given Singapore’s aggressive immigration regime, or one with a more clearly class-defined premise than those parties in the current stable. As it stands, perhaps due to lack of clear data on support bases, Singapore’s opposition parties seem to calibrate their messages oddly. The SDP, for instance, sees its main supporters as upper middle class, but its messages seem more oriented toward working-class voters, for example, harping on the need for more-generous social-welfare support. In the same vein, some of the SPP’s rally speeches in the Mountbatten SMC calling for a clamp-down on immigration could not have gone down well with the many affluent “new citizens” residing in the numerous private condominiums there.

Singapore in the past has had parties to represent ethnic minorities, especially Malays. The Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (Singapore Malay National Organisation), a remnant of the United Malays National Organisation (from when Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaysia), still exists but has been largely absent from electoral politics in recent years. When the GRC system was being debated, ethnic minorities, who then tended to lean opposition, sent in the highest number of submissions to the Select Committee considering the proposal, citing fears that Malay MPs would simply “tag along” and lack independent credibility; that they would not be able to focus on the ethnic issues they were supposedly fielded to represent; and that the PAP, rather than the community, would thus choose their MPs.³⁰

These concerns still arise. During campaign rallies, Malay candidates from both sides addressed their community specifically, in the Malay language. The PAP’s Amrin Amin, for instance, insisted that only an inclusive PAP with a strong mandate, and not a two- or three-party system, could meet the aspirations of Malay voters.³¹ The SDP’s Damanhuri Abas, in contrast, called for a lively opposition bloc to counter a PAP that had shown itself neither sympathetic to the community’s concerns nor willing to address “sensitive” issues to redress discrimination.³²

30. Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), pp. 216–21.

31. Amrin Amin, PAP rally speech, September 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_z3iEMYNbnk>, accessed October 25, 2015.

32. Damanhuri Abas, SDP rally speech, September 9, 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVSxTUs4wRc>>, accessed October 25, 2015.

Even among ethnic-Chinese voters, the WP presents itself not only as a catch-all party but also as one distinctly in touch with the Teochew-speaking community, given that its power base of Hougang constituency is historically Teochew Chinese. While that identity category seems to be fading with each generation (not least given the all-pervasive English medium of instruction in Singaporean schools), candidates who privilege the Teochew “dialect” rather than Mandarin or English, thereby acknowledging that social pedigree, not only validate the category but in effect pressure the PAP to adapt in turn. It may be because the WP in particular presented a distinctly “Chinese” image, at least in certain venues (and an image also associated with a less advantaged class position), that the PAP was pressed in 2015 to assert its candidates’ “commoner” roots, through personal narratives and (sometimes awkwardly stilted) insertion of “dialect” or the “Singlish” patois.

The Opposition as “Co-driver”

The model with the greatest resonance in Singapore is a uniquely modest one. The main opposition parties, most notably the WP, conceive of themselves more as “co-drivers” or voices to check the PAP than as fully equal partners or a government-in-waiting. Only through such a strategy can these parties counter the PAP’s still-recurrent warnings of a “freak election result,” in which the PAP does not win enough seats to form the government (presumably leaving the fractious opposition parties to cobble together a coalition government). Observers this time even thought the tremendous opposition hype—including purported bookmakers’ tables circulated via WhatsApp and social media, predicting huge opposition gains, on the eve of the elections—may have dissuaded some voters who might otherwise have voted opposition.

The co-driver strategy acknowledges that the PAP government is not an all-out authoritarian, coercive regime, even if it is far from liberal democracy. This approach represents creative adaptation to contestation against a consistently popular party, in the name of accountability, and in light of genuinely contentious policies and their externalities. Ultimately, the strategy is less about getting into office as a means of securing power than about offering a lever to push the dominant party to reform, or at least to better explain and defend its choices. The WP’s “Empower Your Future” slogan, then, was a bit of a mischaracterization; the SDP’s “Your Voice in Parliament” more accurately captured the gist of the approach.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Close examination of Singapore's 2015 general election confirms how difficult it is to challenge a dominant party through elections in a hybrid regime. On the other hand, attention to policy-making between elections, to messaging and mobilization on both sides, and to the nature of opposition strategies suggests that a focus on elections themselves may miss a larger point.

For the PAP, the party has struggled to remake itself as a *competitive* party; in the past it has not had to compete on the same scale. No longer can it expect walkovers or such firm control of media and messaging. Nor can it expect to be assessed only in terms of policy intentions or outcomes: its candidates must be able to work the ground and genuinely connect with voters. For all its candidates' celebration of Singapore's "special" system, in which welfarism and populism are bad and good leaders do not shy away from "unpopular" policies, the fact of a real opposition presence on the landscape, even one with only co-driver aspirations, has changed the party's approach. Already in the wake of the 2011 election, senior statesperson Chan Heng Chee (who built her academic career in the 1970s detailing the depoliticization of policy-making in Singapore) admonished technocrats to think more like politicians, who realize that designing "good policy" includes "understanding . . . how it will be received on the ground."³³ MPs now have to be genuinely *elected*, not just selected, however painstaking the PAP's own baroque mode of tapping new talent.

In short, a key implication of a valid opposition presence is to be less an electoral threat, and more a force that moves policy-making from a technocratic to a political frame. Even the inclusion of more opposition voices in parliament would probably not be sufficient to shift decision-making authority decisively. However, that participation opens up the process more, including for articulation of alternatives—and opposition MPs, including non-constituency MPs, now have platforms through which to publicize their interventions—which ultimately increases accountability.

The implications for the opposition are perhaps more fraught. The co-driver strategy may be tame enough to satisfy anxious and not-so-happy voters, but it is inherently limiting. First, it is not clear that complaining voters actually agree that they need a voice *in parliament* to sway the PAP, should they disagree with

33. Phua Mei Pen, "S'pore 'Now Needs Politicians,'" *Straits Times* (Singapore), March 31, 2012 [accessed via LexisNexis].

government policies. The mere fact of an electoral threat brought forth massive benefits—the aforementioned “carrots,” including improvements to health care, childcare and eldercare facilities, public housing estates, and more—this time, although the WP may be correct in its suggestion that some PAP policy changes also followed opposition proposals. If voters simply want to vent, they can do so on social media and at rallies, without taking a possible hit to local amenities in their own ward, for the sake of installing alternative voices for the greater good. Such logic seems perhaps to have been in play this time.

Second, the co-driver strategy has potentially perverse implications for parties' resource allocation and leadership development. The objective—particularly for the smaller parties—is to get the most articulate (or most dominant) party leaders into parliament, not necessarily to secure the greatest number of seats. (Aiming for greater numbers might renew concerns of a “freak election result,” in which the PAP loses its majority.) To focus attention on only a few individuals, and not on deepening or empowering the leadership ranks, is then a perfectly reasonable strategy—but one at odds with party institutionalization, let alone eventually being able to think toward a change of government.

Lastly, so unambitious an approach constrains what vision an opposition party may articulate: minor tweaks to policies are okay, a new vision or an ideological challenge is not. The current competitive model really leaves no space to propose that equality or social justice matters as much as overall growth, for instance, even if the distinctions among parties' policies actually emphasize these visions of the social good differently. How, then, to shift the frame—or even to shift the focus back to national policy programs, rather than having elections serve as referenda on municipal governance or, at best, narrow policy details? If the opposition can strive only to do precisely what the PAP does, about as well, while refining PAP policies, it *can* only be (as the WP's critics claim it to be) “PAP lite.”

The adaptive co-driver strategy, in other words, carves out space for opposition parties to develop and have some influence, but at the cost of playing squarely within the dominant party's rules—of ceding the big picture to the PAP and eschewing ideological claims. That part of the challenge to technocratic administrative-statehood³⁴ in Singapore has been to draw attention to

34. Chan Heng Chee, “Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has the Politics Gone?” in *Understanding Singapore Society*, ed. Ong Jin Hui, et al. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997 [1974]), pp. 294–306.

personalities rather than platforms (the emphasis on humble, likeable candidates) only exaggerates this skew toward working within the PAP's framework. As the personal vote displaces or shares space with the party vote, that rebalancing further reduces the salience of ideology.

In short, the conduct and unanticipated outcome of Singapore's 2015 general elections shed light on popular priorities and party strategies in Singapore itself. More than that, though, the results offer a chance to explore how opposition parties function under stable electoral authoritarianism: how would-be challengers adapt and pitch their challenge, and what sort of influence they may wield, even without clearing the PAP clouds away.