

In memory of my mother
Wong Jaik Ngo
who lived till the age of 100
and passed away on 22 February 2011.

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A Nation Awakes

Frontline Reflections

Edited by Tan Jee Say



Acknowledgements

My thanks go first to all the authors who contributed personal stories about their participation in the two Singapore elections of 2011. This is also their book and their story as well as mine. Collectively we created history and are proud to record our role in these two watershed elections. I am particularly gratified that the authors wrote about their experiences in graphic detail, their trials and tribulations, the conflicts within them and with their loved ones, their friends and their colleagues, often baring their souls in the process.

The outcome is a unique book of autobiographical-style accounts that tell stories straight from the heart. These would not have been possible without the help of all our supporters to whom we owe an eternal debt of gratitude. I would have liked more of them to contribute their stories as well but am sorry that they could not do so like my media liaison chief Faz, and Basil.

I would like to acknowledge my sincere thanks to Sir Ivor Crewe and Professor Staffan Lindberg for contributing the foreword and prologue respectively. Both have been forthcoming and steadfast in their support. Their deep knowledge of politics in various countries around the world and in different time periods provide the international and historical context for us to view Singapore's recent electoral experiences, and in the process help us understand where and how we are headed in the future.

My thanks also go to Associate Professor Lily Rahim, Professor Rajiva Wijesinha and Tim Tacchi who provided their respective endorsements of the book without hesitation when I requested for them.

Finally I owe my wife Patricia an immense debt of gratitude for her support and encouragement without which I would never have been able to embark on this political journey of a lifetime. She took care of the family and the children while I was busy with my political work. She is a tower

of support and a great source of strength. I would also like to thank all my siblings and their families, other relatives and family friends for their active support during the two elections.

There are others such as the photographers who uploaded their photographs on Facebook without leaving behind their names. They deserve our thanks too, including the designer who created the "Heart of the Nation" logo that was used at the presidential election rally in Toa Payoh Sports Stadium. This scene is reflected on the book cover.

Last but not least, I thank everyone at the publisher Ethos Books, particularly Hoe Fang, Alvan and Khai Xin, for their meticulous care and attention to detail in ensuring the successful and timely completion of the book.

Tan Jee Say

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce and commend this fascinating and stirring book about Singapore's recent presidential and general elections. The pleasure is partly personal. I have come to know Tan Jee Say and his delightful family through our mutual link with University College, Oxford, of which he is an alumnus and I am now Master. I take a special interest in those of our alumni who aspire to the highest office, especially when they do so out of commitment to the welfare of their community and country as distinct from mere self-promotion.

But the pleasure is more than personal. By revealing the feelings, thoughts and motives of a diverse group of hard-working professional Singaporeans who immersed themselves in the election campaigns, this book is testimony to the vital importance and benefits of active citizenship, vigorous democracy and public-spirited leadership. Many of the individual accounts of involvement in the elections are a moving reminder of the personal sacrifices that people are willing to make to further their vision of a better society. To support an opposition candidate in a country accustomed to continuous single-party rule is to risk job security, business prospects, family life, personal privacy and social acceptance. Although the contributors to this book would never make the claim themselves, they are all modest heroes.

We shall not know for many years how important a moment the 2011 presidential and general elections constituted in Singapore's history. But there must be a good prospect that future historians will regard the elections as a major milestone on Singapore's road to a more competitive and balanced party system, as a significant break on the PAP's monopoly of power. There are numerous examples of countries that began their democratic life dominated for many decades by the 'foundational' party that brought about independence and democracy, but gradually and in fits and starts developed into a more plural democracy – Mexico, India and Israel all come to mind.

If Singapore moves in the same direction, it will require a skilful and mature opposition movement (or movements cooperating with one another). A successful challenge to the dominance of a party accustomed to power

and its trappings needs many things: an idea of a different future which appeals to ordinary citizens; a realistic, pragmatic, carefully thought through programme; an organisation on the ground, but above all leadership. To change the world around one always requires leadership – the combination of vision, conviction, integrity and courage – that moves others to action that they would not otherwise have undertaken. This book reveals that leadership is not restricted to a few people at the pinnacle of an organisation, vital though that is, but can be exercised at all levels. The doctor, the teacher, the social worker and the community activist – to name but some – who decided to work for the election campaign gave a leadership to their own networks and circles.

Singapore's rise from fishing village and trading port to an international financial hub in the space of half a century is a remarkable success story. In a world crippled by ethnic conflict and social disorder, its construction of an ordered, stable, multi-ethnic society is also an achievement to acknowledge, even if criticism can be levelled at some of the methods adopted. But a successful society, and in the long term a healthy economy, consists of more than an ever rising GDP and an authoritarian culture. It encompasses substantive as well as procedural democracy: free and fair elections, high levels of political participation and genuine competition for office. Governments that fear loss of an election, and are not in a position to manipulate the outcome, are accountable to the people and are more likely to respond to their needs than those always confident of re-election. Just as a competitive market for capital and labour produces efficiency and innovation in business, so a competitive market of political power produces efficiency and innovation in government.

The founder of the modern Olympics said that “the most important thing is not winning but taking part”. This is the message that shines out from the contributors to this book. The presidential election was one of those elections in which the official winner was in many ways the loser and the official loser was in many ways the winner. By showing that it was possible to launch a major challenge against the dominant party, Tan Jee Say and his friends and supporters bestowed a great service to the people of Singapore, not only this year but for the future.

Sir Ivor Crewe
Oxford
December 2011

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Sir Ivor Crewe is Master of University College, Oxford. He was Vice Chancellor of the University of Essex from 1995 to 2007, following spells as Pro Vice Chancellor Academic, founding Director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research and Head of the Department of Government.

He is actively engaged in the UK national policy scene in higher education. He was Chair of the England and Northern Ireland Council of UniversitiesUK from 2001 to 2003 and President of UniversitiesUK from 2003 to 2005. Currently he is a member of the governing bodies of the School of Oriental and African Studies, the European University Institute in Florence, and the University of the Arts London.

Sir Ivor has a continuing interest in British and American politics, mainly in the subjects of elections, parties, public opinion and public policy (especially disasters and blunders!), on which he has published and broadcast extensively.

Preface

Few nations if any, have ever held two national elections in a span of four months. Fewer still are key players who took part in both. This book is the story of extraordinary men and women who fought Singapore's 2011 General Election in May and the Presidential Election in August. Together with their loyal and dedicated supporters, they displayed great courage and conviction, and in so doing changed the political landscape forever.

Courage and Maturity are the underlying themes of this book, a collection of essays by the principal players and their supporters in these two nationwide elections. The courage of men and women who stood up for their beliefs, overturned fear on its head and entered the political fray for the first time in their lives. The courage also of ordinary voters who overcame their fear and reticence, and openly declared their support for opposition candidates – a surprising change of behaviour that gave vent to pent-up frustration and unhappiness.

The maturity of candidates who stood against the domineering ruling party not simply for the sake of opposing but who felt it their national duty to offer a diversity of choice to voters. The maturity also of voters who responded and flagged their preference for diversity – a reflection of an emerging sophisticated and politically developed electorate.

The writers of this book represent a broad spectrum of Singapore society – student, teacher, university researcher, social worker, doctor, economist, lawyer, advertising, media and IT personnel, blogger, housewife and retiree. They have come together in this book to relate and share their personal journey with Singaporeans. At my request, Patricia wrote about her experiences as spouse of a candidate, with the objective of calming the nerves of spouses who might otherwise discourage their loved ones from getting involved in frontline politics.

Unlike most post-election commentaries written by third-party observers, this book is unique as it allows readers to hear from the horse's mouth how, in four short months, Singapore's single dominant party system has given

way to the emergence of a politics of diversity with positive implications for the country's future system of government.

This significant change has come about because of a much increased level of political competition which in turn further democratises Singapore society, a theme that is discussed in the prologue by Staffan Lindberg, a renowned international scholar of elections and democratisation. It could lead Singapore on the road to a more competitive and balanced party system, a prospect discussed by Sir Ivor Crewe in the foreword, in which he also outlined the things that need to be done before there could be a successful challenge to single-party dominance. This adds to the overall thrust of the epilogue in which I urge political players to get organised and prepare Singapore and Singaporeans for a broad-based non-PAP government after the next general election which is expected to be called no later than 2016.

Tan Jee Say

Staying Relevant
with Neither
Sound Nor Fury

Alex Au

Staying Relevant With Neither Sound Nor Fury

by Alex Au

The moment of truth came as soon as the lunch was over. Tony Tan stood by the door of the private dining room shaking the hands of his eight new media invitees, who in turn thanked him for the opportunity to meet. I don't remember who first popped the question, but it quickly became obvious that others were equally interested, there being a general assent that it was a good idea.

"Can we have a picture?" that someone asked. Naturally, Tony Tan agreed.

Gleefully, the main body moved into the heat and glare of the afternoon sun. I hung back. I think I was the only one not particularly keen on it. What purpose would such a picture serve? What dispurpose would it create?

At the start, it seemed that I might escape it, for the invitees chose to pose one by one with Tony Tan. Standing as far back as I could without actually falling into a bush, I hoped they would all get tired of the rounders before anyone noticed me. Alas, someone then proposed a group shot and I faced the dilemma of whether to be in the composition. If I said no, it might come across as impolite, anti-social, or worse, a snub towards Tony Tan. I was no convert, but nonetheless, snubbing would be uncalled for. But if I said yes, how would the photograph be perceived? Would people misinterpret my presence as endorsement?

As with all such moments, one is given no time at all to weigh the pros and cons; ultimately peer pressure prevails. So I found myself in the group, and next thing I knew, the photograph was circulating on Facebook.

Alternative new media is a work in progress. Practitioners like me are still trying to define, through actual practice, what we mean by 'alternative' and even what we mean by 'media'.

Alternative to what? Are we to be a foil to things said in *The Straits Times*, *Today* or on *Channel NewsAsia*? Do we find ourselves driven to stake out positions opposed to those espoused by the mainstream media and the policy-makers they cover lavishly? If so, one might argue that we don't really

set our own agenda, being little more than reflexive counterpoints to the news of the day.

What does it mean to be 'media'? Is the established way of journalism in Singapore the only way of being media? More specifically, must bloggers be dispassionate and detached from their subjects? There seems to be an expectation that 'good' reporting and commentary have to be relatively dry, complete with earnest attempts at 'balance' or 'objectivity' – concepts that in Singapore have been shaped by our political history. Or can bloggers embrace our subjects? Can we afford to be seen embracing our subjects and championing causes without being dismissed as credulous, or, to use a more pejorative term, biased?

Maybe I am the old-school type, overly conscious of such risks and therefore reluctant to join in the group photograph. How many *Straits Times* writers, after all, eagerly pose with their subjects after an interview? How many MediaCorp reporters put themselves in the same frame as newsmakers? But it was evident that my peers in new media had no such qualms. They went as their instincts took them. Let the chips fall where they may. Why spend a single second wondering whether alternative new media must emulate the mainstream old?

Content And Irrelevance

The presidential election posed another difficulty: What do I write about? The root of that difficulty was the extremely limited role of the president. In a general election, nearly every utterance by election candidates will have import because eventually the elected ones will get to set policy. But with presidential candidates, does it matter what their views on this and that are when the president has no power to change anything? Here we have a system that allows only highly qualified people to contest for a post, individuals who would naturally have great experience and well-formed views on a range of issues, and yet, all that would have little relevance to a largely ceremonial post.

Compounding the difficulty was the lack of consensus among Singaporeans as to what the job was for. As the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) would later find in a survey it conducted post-election¹, 80 percent of respondents thought that the role of an elected president included ensuring that the government managed the economy wisely, with 96 percent of them considering this important in shaping their vote-choice. To another question

in the survey, 65 percent held the view that the president was free to decide Singapore's policy on multiracialism. For 94 percent, this was an important factor in deciding their vote. Yet both of these expectations ran contrary to the constitutional role of the president. Should bloggers write about how each presidential candidate would hold the government's management of the economy to account, and how he would set directions for our multiracialism policies? It would certainly interest a lot of readers, but it would arguably be a public disservice, reinforcing an unfounded view of the job. How many bloggers would chase hits, writing about what the public wants to hear?

But if we don't write about that, what do we write about? The colour of his tie?

Eventually, I found the most comment-worthy aspect of the election to be the behaviour of the government itself rather than any candidate's. In the weeks leading up to the campaign period, cabinet ministers struggled to correct misimpressions about the scope of presidential powers², from the office-holder's freedom to speak his mind publicly, to influencing the government privately. There were also questions raised about the president's role in clemency appeals from prisoners on death row, and over detentions without trial under the Internal Security Act. The government managed to make some headway. While it clearly did not convince the majority of Singaporeans, as is now evident from IPS's survey, it probably made the needed impression on those who were following the news, including many webmasters. And to that extent, one might say it played a part in framing the new media commentary through the campaign. The result was that one didn't see alternative new media going the whole hog on issues that were irrelevant to the job.

Another point of interest was the open question of how many of the aspirants the Presidential Elections Committee would rule as eligible to contest. Tan Jee Say's case was the most uncertain, though a very strict interpretation could also rule Tan Kin Lian out. I felt moved to write about the flaw in having such a paternalistic system, which I think will remain a contentious issue in future presidential elections. It is a view shared, I believe, by others in academia and what might be called the intellectual circles. Yet, the same IPS survey found 90 percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "The process of certifying who is eligible to contest for the post of Elected President is necessary". To the vast majority of Singaporeans, having this bureaucratic guillotine do its job before they get to

exercise their democratic rights didn't seem to bother them. So there I was writing about an issue that was of little interest to many.

It's not my place to speak for other bloggers and webmasters in new media, but this example perhaps points to something that is too often glossed over. Far from the caricature of the alternative new media as the heckling voice of the great unwashed, some of us, at least, may well be the opposite. With no need to be popular, with no commercial interest in wide circulation, we are more often than not representatives of niche interests, talking about arcane things that don't interest most people.

This suggests an answer to the question: How influential was new media in people's vote choices? At a superficial level, it can't be important, a fact that is borne out in another IPS study³ which found that only 30 percent of Singaporeans read political news on blogs or Facebook or both during the general election of May 2011. Researchers, however, note that such measures oversimplify the reality, which is that ideas flow from one person to another by various channels, including face-to-face personal conversation. An idea or perspective originating from one marginal channel may become dominant through iteration via other means. That being the case, the influence of any one channel on overall public discourse cannot be discerned from readership data alone.

Only Two Interviews

In the absence of any great controversy between what each candidate represented or would do within the scope of the office, what was there to write about the candidates themselves? I eventually aimed to merely let each man – and they were all men – have a say through an interview. I decided quite early on that I would leave Tony Tan to the last, and include him only if time permitted. This was because I expected him to get the most favourable attention from the mainstream media and, as possibly the one with the best name recognition, he needed my help least.

In the end, I didn't even manage to interview Tan Cheng Bock. His Facebook page had no contact information and, as far as I recall, I couldn't even find a website for his campaign, let alone an email address. Perhaps he felt confident that there was no need for much new media engagement to win, either because he had carefully calculated his chances or simply because, as a politician of long vintage, he wasn't fully appraised of its impact. By the time I managed to reach him and his handlers – at *The Online Citizen's* Face-

2-Face forum – it was already very late in the campaign. Still, I didn't get any reply until I went through someone else who knew someone in the campaign, and that reply was that he had no more free time.

I will let you in on a secret: it was a bit of a relief. Already I wasn't proud of the interviews I did with Tan Jee Say and Tan Kin Lian. They weren't pointed enough. This was partly because, with the job scope being so limited, there were hardly any burning issues to probe them on. Tan Cheng Bock was, from the looks of it, an even more guarded speaker than Jee Say and Kin Lian. Would an interview with him have produced sponge cake?

Without being able to get through to Tan Cheng Bock, it seemed superfluous to try getting Tony Tan, and anyway, time was running out. A campaign period of nine days passed in a blink.

Who Is 'Alternative'?

Unlike the general election where there were straight fights in nearly all constituencies and it was obvious that, overall, the main contest was between the People's Action Party and a rough collection known as 'the opposition', at the presidential election, there was no standard-bearer for the 'anti-government' side (for want of a better term). Tony Tan was clearly the candidate favoured by the government, but among the other three, there was no clear front-runner.

If the campaign had carried on for longer in roughly the same vein, how, I wondered, would reporting and commentary on alternative new media have turned out? The absence of a single candidate to line up behind would likely have meant a tendency to give all (or at least three) candidates equal airtime. In other words, new media would adopt the same dispassionate, detached, 'balanced' writing style that the mainstream media was more or less practising. Hunger for alternatives having been satiated with choice, the fire would be gone from the belly.

I was rather tickled by the thought. It's a harbinger of what new media would be like some years in the future, if Singapore politics should become more plural and less bipolar. The difference in style we today consider so immutably characteristic of new and old media would be shown up as merely an artefact of the times.

One More Burst Of Fire

But there was time yet for one more burst of fire. There was one more frontier

to breach: endorsement.

One of the most depressing things in Singapore is the widespread fear of being politically engaged. To be political is seen as toxic to one's career and social well-being. Even as more and more people take an interest in politics, there remains a great reluctance to wear one's colours on one's sleeve. In both the surveys IPS conducted post-general election and post-presidential election, participants were asked whom they voted for. Half or more of respondents refused to provide an answer.

We cannot mature as a democracy until we get over this phobia. Honest discussion is impossible so long as people feel they cannot say what is really on their minds, and our society cannot be a civil one unless we learn to respect others whatever their political persuasion may be, and not treat those who disagree with us as vermin to be exterminated.

To encourage this process, quite early on I began to think of making an endorsement of one candidate or another. I hadn't decided whom to endorse – at that stage it wasn't even clear whom the Presidential Elections Committee would pre-qualify – but the act of public endorsement, I felt, would promote a more open and honest democracy. It should help dispel the fear of stating one's affiliations.

My initially vague idea was partly derailed but ultimately crystallised in an unexpected way. The circus train of endorsements of Tony Tan by hitherto obscure clan associations and government-affiliated unions – reportedly without even consulting their members – made the very notion of endorsement almost a sick joke. It certainly repelled a significant number of Singaporeans. A whopping 68 percent of respondents to IPS Presidential Election Survey 2011⁴ agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Social organisations, unions or other community groups should not be allowed to endorse candidates in the presidential election". I don't know if Singaporeans are aware that in Western liberal democracies, such organisations routinely endorse candidates or parties, but it appears that our citizens sensed an unwelcome attempt at manipulating their opinions in the local context. The circus train further risked becoming a kind of juggernaut that would crush other political opinions. Singaporeans have long ago learnt to read such cues, and know when to shut up for their own self-preservation.

A little alarmed that, once again, we were about to debase an honourable democratic tradition when transplanted into Singapore, I was determined

to issue an endorsement myself. Eventually. After a little hesitation over the risk that mine too might be considered a sick joke, I hoped people would see it in a very different light. Unlike the clan associations and unions, I made no claim to represent anyone but myself, and I took the trouble to state clear reasons why I came to the decision I did. If people disagreed with me, those stated reasons would be the points of departure. My endorsement was meant to open debate, not close it.

I later asked Choo Zheng Xi whether *The Online Citizen* also considered issuing an endorsement. “Yes, we did,” he said, “but we couldn’t agree on whom to endorse.” That is indeed one of the risks of running a joint site, very different from a solo site like *Yawning Bread*.

It may come as a surprise to some that I should say this: for me, the act of endorsing, and what that example might inspire in others, was more important than whom I endorsed. In truth, I was a shade more committed to doing what I could to improve the system than to advancing any candidate’s prospects. And in a way, I think all the candidates who stood in the presidential election did it for similar reasons – to ensure a contest, to breathe life into a process that had become moribund, and in so doing, to serve the greater good.

And so, I had come full circle – from the reluctance to join the group photo session after Tony Tan’s lunch for fear of wrongly signalling my position, to a determination to break out of a lifeless twilight zone that is desiccated, arm’s-length reporting by means of a published endorsement. Coming full circle is a bit of an irony that is not lost on me.

The Blogger’s Dilemma

What does alternative new media do? What influence does it have? What difference does it make? We still don’t know the answers. It’s a constantly shifting creature, often responding to what individual bloggers and commentators consider lacunae in our political discourse and trying our best to fill them. Equally, we are shaped, in turn, by events that present themselves to us, from fine lunches to a surfeit of candidates and, undeniably, to strenuous efforts by cabinet ministers to frame the debate. Does that mean we are influenceable and – let’s not mince words – corruptible? Yes, of course. Are we aware that we are corruptible? Hopefully, that too. And hopefully, we have enough self-respect to remain honest, and in so doing, add in small ways to our politics and society.

Notes:

- 1 Gillian Koh et al, Presidential Election Survey 2011, Institute of Policy Studies
- 2 S Ramesh, PE: Presidency must be handled with judicious care: Shanmugam, Channel NewsAsia, 5 August 2011. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1145264/1/.html>
- 3 Tan Tarn How et al, Impact of new media on general election 2011, Institute of Policy Studies
- 4 Gillian Koh et al, Presidential Election Survey 2011, Institute of Policy Studies

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