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That’s a weird way of looking at the future.
The future isn’t five years away.
For me, the future is what happens tomorrow.
It’s the day that comes after today.
And anything can happen on that day.
One day is all it takes.
For everything to change.
Anything can happen.
And everything will change.
And not necessarily for the better.1

On 11 September 2015, voters went to the polls for Singapore’s 13th general election (GE2015). There were no walkovers this time as every constituency was contested. The People’s Action Party (PAP) won convincingly with 69.9% of the popular vote, winning back the Single Member Constituency (SMC) seat of Punggol East (that was lost at a By-Election in January 2013), and even came close to toppling the Workers’ Party in the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC).2 It was the PAP’s best performance since the GE of 2001, which saw the PAP receiving a popular vote of 75.3% against the backdrop of a world gripped by terrorism fears following 9/11. The result of GE2015 surprised everyone, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In itself, the electoral success of the PAP sweeping 83 out of 89 seats in parliament would be somewhat unremarkable since Singapore had always been dominated by a single-

2 Zakir Hussain, ‘PAP wins big with 69.9% of vote’, The Straits Times, 12 Sep 2015, at 1.
party—and any suggestion that the PAP would be displaced in 2015 was always going to be irrational.3

But this was not just any other election. Did Singaporeans not vote in and for change in GE2011?4 Did not the voters of Hougang and Punggol East affirm their overwhelming desire for change in the respective by-elections of 2012 and 2013?

The words of the Opening Act of Cooling-Off Day by Alfi An Sa’at above captures the essence of a General Election: ‘anything can happen on that day’, and that ‘everything will change’, a change that can take place in any possible direction.5 At the same time however, it denotes that elections are not frozen in time, and should be seen as a broader and longer-term trajectory of changes and developments. Just as ‘one swallow doth not a summer make’, a famous saying attributed to Aristotle, so one election result does not necessarily mark out the next. GE2015 certainly illuminated this truism. Yet, despite the unexpected results of GE2015, it must still be seen and understood as the sequel to the gripping encounter that was GE2011.

Indeed, GE2011 heralded a number of firsts in Singapore’s political landscape: it was the first time an opposition party won a GRC and it was the first time many Singaporeans witnessed a Prime Minister issuing an unequivocal public apology for his government’s failings. In statistical terms, although the ruling PAP secured 81 of the 87 parliamentary seats, a landslide by any measure, it received only 60.1% of the popular votes, the lowest since the nation’s independence.

GE2011 also saw the emergence of a more sophisticated and articulate electorate, many of whom were younger, first time voters who are savvy users of the Internet and social media, and who are not afraid to show their political allegiances publicly. It was not surprising then that GE2011 was variously described in the aftermath as a political, social and cultural ‘game-changer’, a political ‘awakening’, and perhaps the single most overused term, a ‘watershed’. Singaporeans were arguably voting in change, and perhaps a ‘new normal’ that would result in a gradual shift towards a two-party political system and/or a more responsive government that would pay closer attention to the needs of the people.

With memories of GE2011—and to an extent, the two by-elections that followed—and a broad desire by Singaporeans to conduct a stock-take of the policy responses of the PAP government, there was palpable excitement in the air in the lead-up to the 2015 polls. With their interests in domestic politics heightened by increased participation in 2011, GE2015 was destined to be eventful, if not more gripping than ever before. Will the PAP arrest its popular vote decline? Will the Workers’ Party extend their oppositional credentials? How will the Singapore Democratic Party perform under their remade chief Chee Soon Juan? Will we see the clear emergence of Singapore’s next generation leadership, with the anointment of the next Prime Minister? Which ‘suicide squad’ of candidates will the PAP send to contest and wrest back Aljunied GRC?7 Will a prominent minister be sent to helm Aljunied GRC?

These were just some of the questions many voters would have asked as it became clear in the course of the year that a Golden Jubilee General Election will be called in 2015. The majority of the answers—with the exception of the precise composite of Singapore’s next generation leaders, which is always a work-in-progress—would no doubt surface either implicitly or explicitly as the GE2015 campaign unfolded.

SG50 Election and The LKY-Effect

On 25 August 2015, shortly after President Tony Tan issued the Writ of Election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced on his Facebook page:

This morning, I advised the President to dissolve Parliament and issue the Writ of Election. Nomination Day will be Tuesday, 1 September, and Polling Day, 11 September. I call this general election to seek your

3 PAP Chairman and then National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan did in fact stoke fears of the PAP government losing if a freak result ensued. It is conceivable that this would have had an effect, however small or large, on the voting outcome. See: Salma Khalik and Tham Yuen-C, ‘No guarantee PAP will be in govt after polls: Khaw’, The Straits Times, 8 Sep 2015, at 1.
5 Sa’at, n 1 above.
6 See, for example, Catherine Lim, A Watershed Election: Singapore’s GE 2011 (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011).
mandate to take Singapore beyond SG50, into the next half century. You will be deciding who will govern Singapore for the next 5 years. More than that, you will be choosing the team to work with you for the next 15–20 years. You will be setting the direction for Singapore for the next 50 years.8

With this announcement, all speculation ceased. Political parties, especially the opposition, began in earnest to prepare for the September polls.

The invocation of SG50—the codename for Singapore’s year-long celebration of her 50th year of independence—in the PM’s announcement was deliberate as he sought to leverage off the grandest-ever National day celebration that took place a couple of weeks’ earlier on 9 August 2015. The Prime Minister had also just delivered his annual National Day Rally Speech two days prior, on 23 August 2015, where he further drew on the legacy of his father and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to generate confidence among Singaporeans that under the PAP, Singapore will continue to thrive well into the future. Towards the end of his Rally speech, PM Lee read out a letter from one of Lee Kuan Yew’s good friends:

As it was the start of 2015, we talked at length about the celebrations for SG50. We took turns to encourage Mr Lee to attend as many SG50 events as possible. Actually, we hoped he would be there for the SG50 National Day Parade. Mr Lee listened to our exhortations, but stopped short of saying yes to our suggestions.

At each of our gatherings, it had become a tradition to ask Mr Lee ‘Will there be a Singapore many years from now?’ Once, Mr Lee said ‘Maybe.’ On another, Mr Lee said ‘Yes, if there is no corruption.’

This was classic Mr Lee—ever-believing in Singapore, yet ever-cognisant that there was always work to be done, that we should never take things for granted.

Continuing with our tradition and in the spirit of SG50, that evening we asked him ‘Will there be a Singapore 50 years from now?’ Mr Lee’s answer took us all by surprise.

That evening, for the first time, Mr Lee said: ‘Of course there will be… even better!’9

While the mass mourning and subsequently yearning for the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew were spontaneous and heartfelt, the decision to capitalise on his memory, even subtly, for GE2015, was entirely orchestrated. It would be difficult to quantify the efficacy of the ‘LKY-effect’ on GE2015. Yet it was evident that the week-long national mourning that took place in Singapore in March 2015 had brought about a resurgence of patriotism and national pride. Indeed, the massive public outpouring of grief by many Singaporeans and foreigners in Singapore and around the world over the loss of Lee Kuan Yew, with accolades and expressions of gratitude encircling mainstream and social media, was unprecedented.10

As the melancholy of Lee’s demise began to dissipate after the state funeral, it was entirely conceivable that the PAP leaders would have begun to consider holding the General Election in 2015 to extract full dividends from the LKY-effect. This was nothing more than political expediency. Indeed, whispers of a Jubilee year General Election gathered pace from April 2015. But given that an earlier election that would blatantly ride on the LKY-effect could spark cynical reactions from the public, some of whom might still be grieving, the government prudently held it off in preference for a relatively small window of opportunity for the polls to take place in September 2015—after the National Day celebrations in August and before the 2015 Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix event kicked off a week after. It appears that a rare Friday polling date of 11 September 2015 was chosen to accommodate the final day of the Hungry Ghost Festival on Saturday, 12 September 2015, an event observed by many Taoist and Buddhist Singaporeans. There were even jokes circulating on social media that the spirit of LKY was set free during the election campaign, which coincided with the Hungry Ghost period, and had a part to play in the victory.

As the Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen revealed in an interview with Straits Times assistant political editor Rachel Chang in July 2015, ‘Mr

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Lee’s death was actually a final gift to his political party. He was really articulating the government’s belief that the LKY-effect would have had a sizeable impact on the PAP’s vote share, although the caution was that the effect would be a one-off. Coupled with a well-orchestrated year-long SG50 celebration across the city-state and the discretionary power of the Prime Minister to call for an election that suits the PAP’s timing, GE2015 demonstrated incumbency advantage par excellence. It also reveals sagacious politics on the part of the PAP and pays testament to Singapore’s much-vaunted ideology of pragmatism.

The Pragmatics of GE2015

One of the most pervasive ideologies of PAP-run Singapore is pragmatism. In common parlance, the term refers to the mindset of ‘being practical’ and the desire for ‘practical results’. In the context of Singapore, pragmatism has become entwined with the derivation of economic returns and the maintenance of political dominance by the PAP. Singapore’s success as a global economic powerhouse is attributed precisely to its pragmatic leadership and administration. It is no coincidence therefore that the late Lee Kuan Yew was described as a ‘pragmatist’ by just about every international media outlets when they sought to write their versions of his obituary. The Guardian (UK) described Lee as having left a ‘legacy of authoritarian pragmatism’, an opinion column in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) The Drum website described Lee as ‘Singapore’s greatest pragmatist’, and, The Economist conflates Singapore’s success with Lee’s legacy of ‘an honest and pragmatic government’. In other words, Singapore under LKY and the PAP has become synonymous with the ideology of pragmatism.

Pluralising the term ‘pragmatic’ into ‘pragmatics’, however, takes the discourse into a slightly different plane. In the field of linguistics and interpersonal communication, pragmatics refers to the social language skills we use in our daily interactions and conversations with others. They include what we say, how we say it, our body language and the extent of its appropriateness in relation to any given situation. Pragmatics is more commonly applied as ‘conversation analysis’ where in order to conclude if a message between two parties is accurately transmitted and received, otherwise known as ‘pragmatic competence’, the meanings in each communicative act must be properly understood by both parties. In other words, it seeks to uncover if two parties can communicate competently—and therefore, practically.

To appreciate the ‘change in voting’ that we witnessed in GE2015, we would do well to recall the swift actions taken by the PAP following the electorate’s expressed desire for change, à la ‘voting in change’. I argue that the application of the principles of ‘pragmatics’, both in communication and in ideological terms contributed significantly to the reversal of the PAP’s electoral fortunes. Singaporeans voted pragmatically at GE2011, desiring their voices to be heard and seeking changes to a number of policy areas, and aside from a few missteps—the most prominent being the 2013 Population White Paper—the PAP responded loudly with communicative and pragmatic competence. In the spirit of the current era of ongoing change, the PAP responded by swiftly communicating their positions on a host of policy areas.

14 Ibid.
20 Tan and Lee, n 4 above.
electioneering and campaigning, the PAP’s party convention of November 2011 became a ‘post-mortem’ self-examination of what went wrong with GE2011. PAP chairman and then Housing Minister Khaw Boon Wan delivered a speech at the convention entitled ‘We hear you, we’ll change, and improve your lives’ which identified the need to ‘communicate and connect with the people via all media (and non-media) platforms. 21 Communications Minister Yaacob Ibrahim responded with a speech of his own that concluded that Singapore’s ‘government communication style must evolve. 22

The PAP thus identified the failure in communication or ‘pragmatic incompetence’ as the weakest link in its style of governance, and sought thereafter to develop strategies to deal with it. The most tangible outcome was the appointment of Janadas Devan as Chief of Government Communications from 1 July 2012. According to the Ministry of Communications and Information, Janadas’ job was to ‘coordinate the Government’s public communication efforts and lead the information Service in enhancing its public communication network across the public sector. 23 Even though it is not clear how Janadas would fulfill this vast mission, many Singaporeans soon saw themselves participating in a year-long nationwide ‘listening’ exercise.

Headed by then newly-minted Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, this was the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) project, designed to ‘reach out to as many Singaporeans as possible, from all walks of life [and] to understand each other’s perspectives and aspirations’. 24 The OSC’s report Reflections declared that 47,000 Singaporeans had participated in more than 660 small group dialogue sessions. Along with 1,331 email threads and more than 4,000 Facebook posts and messages, the government was able to tap on to the concerns and core aspirations of Singaporeans. 25 The promise was that the collective findings of the exercise would be digested and would inform policy reviews through the relevant government agencies. Despite sounding very much like a massive public relations exercise, OSC enabled the government to identify key concerns among Singaporeans and to implement practical solutions to solve them quickly.

In an interview with The Australian daily, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself attributed the improved showing of the PAP government at GE2015 to three things: the LKY factor, SG50 and the government’s hard work in addressing problems on the ground. As The Straits Times reported, Fortunately, in this last election, some of the opposition pitches were so shrill that the population wisely took counsel and decided there was a real risk.

Mr Lee said that the 70 per cent vote share of his People’s Action Party (PAP) in the Sept 11 polls surprised him.

It could be attributed to three things, he added. They are: a sense of gratitude following the death of his father, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, in March; the feel-good factor of the Golden Jubilee; and the Government and PAP Members of Parliament working hard to solve both immediate and long-term issues.

Although we have not solved all the problems, people could see we were working at it, and things were getting better, he said. ‘They gave us credit for trying.

Asked whether the electoral success would be hard to sustain, he said: ‘Every election is different. I do not work on the basis that this is the baseline for the next election.

While the results of GE2015 may be interpreted as Singapore taking a flight (back) to the safety of the only party they have ever known to have ruled Singapore, 26 or revealing a long-held paradox of authoritarian politics, 27 it is also equally important to acknowledge the adaptability of...

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22 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
the PAP, and indeed, the entrenchment of pragmatism as the dominant ideology in the socio-political landscape of Singapore.

Herein lies the ‘new normal’ in Singapore: the U-turn or the directional change in voting that we have witnessed in GE2015 was indeed the sequel to GE2011. Just as GE2006 was the prequel to GE2011, with signs of slow traffic and breakdowns, the road to GE2020 will be paved with bumps, detours and free-flowing passages. In the intervening period, which has already begun, all political parties would do well to acknowledge that voters are intelligent political beings. In the case of Singapore, this intelligence is embodied in its passionate embrace of pragmatism cum pragmatics.

Organisation of This Book

This book is divided into three sections: (1) Introduction and Updates; (2) Core GE2015 issues and (3) Campaign Analyses. Following this opening chapter, Jason Lim tracks in a methodical and chronological manner the key political developments in Singapore from GE2011 up to the eve of GE2015. In Chapter 2, Lim identifies a number of hot-button issues/events that required some degree of state responses in the forms of policy shifts, legal and/or political interventions. Some of these include: policy responses to xenophobic sentiments and the integration of foreigners, heritage concerns and attempts by so-called ‘revisionist historians’ to challenge official versions of historical events, Roy Ngerng’s criticism of the CPF scheme, Amos Yee’s juvenile YouTube video rants against Lee Kuan Yew following his death, and municipal concerns in relation to the Workers’ Party’s alleged mismanagement of the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC). All of these have combined to form the backdrop of issues that many Singaporeans would have carried with them to GE2015. Some of these issues are examined in greater depth in Sections 2 and 3 of this book, yet the extent to which each of them ultimately mattered remains moot.

In Chapter 3, Kevin Tan provides an up-to-date discussion on the status of Singaporeans’ right to vote as well as the prospects of legal and constitutional changes following GE2015. Tan revisits the case of Mdm Vellama d/o Marie Muthu who filed an application to the courts to declare that the Prime Minister did not have an unfettered discretion in deciding whether and when to announce a by-election in the Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) following the expulsion of the Workers’ Party Yaw Shin Leong. The case was mostly forgotten as it was heard only after the by-election, which saw the election of WP’s Png Eng Huat, yet the final outcome was a victory for Vellama, an ordinary citizen who simply wanted an MP at all times to represent her and other residents. Tan heralds this outcome in his chapter as: ‘the most important constitutional law decision the Singapore courts have handed down with respect to the structure of the legislature and the place of elections and citizens’ electoral rights within it.’

Chapter 4 by Loke Hoe Yeong walks us through the parties, personalities and protagonists that defined GE2015. With ‘party-personalities’ a common feature in the media age, Singapore’s GE2015 was no exception. Loke provides a write-up on the candidates who stood for election for the first time. While there were no stand-out candidates from a media publicity point of view, there were nonetheless some who garnered more attention than others. These include, among others, the remade Chee Soon Juan (SDP), Paul Tambyah (SDP), Daniel Goh (WP), He Ting Ru (WP), and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam (PAP).

In Section Two, the authors analyse a number of core GE issues. These are issues that are either perennial, in that they are constantly in the political frame, or have caused some degree of angst at the previous general election (GE2011). Loh Kah Seng starts off this section in Chapter 5 with an analysis of the housing issue which did not feature much in GE2015. This was surprising given that the escalating costs of both public and private
Notes on Contributors

Walid Jumblatt Abdullah is a PhD candidate under the Joint Degree Program between National University of Singapore and King’s College, London. He works on state and religion relations, Southeast Asian politics, and political parties and elections. His works have been published in journals including *Asian Survey, Journal of Church and State*, and *Government and Opposition*.

Terence Chong is a Senior Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute where he is coordinator of the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme. He is a sociologist and his research interests include Christianity in Southeast Asia, heritage, cultural policies and politics in Singapore, and new Chinese immigrants in CLMV countries. He has published in academic journals such as *Journal of Contemporary Asia, Critical Asian Studies, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Modern Asian Studies* and *Asian Studies Review*.

Lam Peng Er is a Senior Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. He obtained his PhD from Columbia University, and has published in various internationally refereed journals such as *Pacific Affairs, Asian Survey* and *Japan Forum*. His latest single-authored book is *Japan’s Peacebuilding Diplomacy in Asia: Seeking a more active political role* (Routledge, 2009).

Terence Lee is an Associate Professor in Communication and Media Studies and a Research Fellow of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, Australia. He is an interdisciplinary researcher with an interest in the intersections of media, culture and politics in Asia, especially Singapore. He is the author or editor of several books, including *Singapore: Negotiating State and Society, 1965-2015* (with Jason Lim, Routledge, 2016), *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore’s 2011 General Election* (with Kevin YL Tan, Ethos Books, 2011) and *The Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore* (Routledge, 2010 and 2012).

Alex Lew is an analyst in a private investment holdings firm, with a background in government policy making in the Economic Development Board (EDB). Previously, he served as President of the Society of Financial Service Professionals, Singapore. He is a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Charterholder, and holds an MBA from the Said Business School, University of Oxford.


Loh Kah Seng is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for East Asian Studies, Sogang University, South Korea. His research investigates the transnational and social history of Singapore and Southeast Asia after the Second World War. Loh is author or editor of six books, including *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and The Making of Modern Singapore* (NUS Press & ASAA 2013).

Loke Hoe Yeong is an Associate Fellow at the European Union Centre in Singapore, a partnership of the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. The author of *Let The People Have Him—Chiam See Tong: The Early Years*, he holds an MSc in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He was involved in assisting the Singapore People’s Party’s campaign team in Potong Pasir constituency during the 2015 General Election.

Natalie Pang is an Assistant Professor in the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information and Principal Investigator at the Centre of Social Media Innovations for Communities (COSMIC), Nanyang Technological University. Prior to this, she worked on public opinion research at The Gallup Organization, citizen science and participatory methods at Monash University and Museum Victoria. Her research interest is in the area of social informatics, focusing on basic and applied research of social media, information behaviour in crises, and structurational models of technology in marginalised communities.

Kevin YL Tan is an Adjunct Professor at both the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. A specialist in constitutional law, legal history and human rights, he has written and edited some 40 books on the law, history and politics of Singapore, including *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore’s 2011 General Election* (with Terence Lee, Ethos Books, 2011).
Krystal Tan is a human resources professional with a keen interest in Singapore election statistics.

Netina Tan is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at McMaster University, Canada. Her dissertation from the University of British Columbia, *Access to Power: Hegemonic Party Rule in Singapore and Taiwan*, won the 2011 Vincent Lemieux Prize for the best PhD thesis submitted at a Canadian institution. Her research on democratization, electoral and party politics, and gender issues in East and Southeast Asia have appeared in *Electoral Studies, International Political Science Review, Politics and Gender, Pacific Affairs* and other book volumes.

Terri-Anne Teo is a Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. She holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Bristol, UK. Her research interests include theories of multiculturalism and critical citizenship, poststructuralist thought and identity politics in Singapore.

Bridget Welsh is a Professor of Political Science at Ipek University (Turkey), Senior Research Associate of the Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, National Taiwan University (Taiwan), and Senior Associate Fellow of The Habibie Centre and University Fellow of Charles Darwin University (Australia). She specialises in Southeast Asian politics, with particular foci on Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore. She is part of the core team of the Asian Barometer Survey. Her most recent book is an edited collection on Malaysia’s UMNO (forthcoming 2016).

Leong Yew is an Assistant Professor in the University Scholars Programme, National University of Singapore. He researches on Asian cultural politics and theory and is the author of *The Disjunctive Empire of International Relations* (Ashgate, 2003) and *Asianness and the Politics of Regional Consciousness in Singapore* (Routledge, 2014). He is also the editor of *Alterities in Asia: Reflections on Identity and Regionalism* (Routledge, 2011).

Weiyu Zhang is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and New Media, National University of Singapore. She holds a PhD in Communication from the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, USA. Her research focuses on civic engagement and ICTs, with an emphasis on Asia. Her published works have appeared in the *Journal of Communication, Communication Theory, Communication Research, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and others. Her recent project is to develop and examine an online platform for citizen deliberation.

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This is even more so when circumstances or events do not conform to expectations. It is fair to say that the 2015 General Election was one of those. It is an accomplishment in itself to be able to write with depth and criticality after encountering a ‘What do we write now?’ moment.

The Editors would therefore like to express our gratitude to all of our contributors who gave of their time and commitment to this project, and for delivering original and thought-provoking analyses of the election outcomes in their respective chapters.

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