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Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election

Edited by
Kevin YL Tan & Terence Lee

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Acknowledgements

This book has its genesis in the unlikely venue of Melbourne University's Law School, where the editors, Kevin Tan and Terence Lee, were attending an academic workshop in June 2010 that looked at the intersections of defamation law, politics and the media in Singapore and Malaysia. During one pre-dinner break, the idea of putting together a book examining the coming general election and publishing it shortly after the polls, was mooted. Initial thanks should thus go to the organiser of the conference, Professor Andrew T Kenyon (Director of the Communication and Media Law Centre at the Melbourne Law School), for bringing us together at the workshop. Also present at the initial discussion were Cherian George and James Gomez, both of whom rendered their support for this project from its inception.

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Notes on Contributors

Au Waipang Alex is the socio-political commentator behind the Yawning Bread blog (www.yawningbread.org). He has also been a gay activist for a good part of his life, with a parallel interest in human rights generally.

Terence Chong is a sociologist and Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. His research interests include religion in Singapore and Malaysia, the development of the Southeast Asian middle class, and cultural globalisation. He is editor of *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (ISEAS, 2010) and *The AWARE Saga: Civil Society and Public Morality in Singapore* (NUS Press, 2011), and author of *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (Routledge, 2010).

Cherian George is an Associate Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, where he researches journalism and politics. He is the author of *Contentious Journalism and the Internet* (NUS, 2006). During the general election, he blogged at www.airconditionednation.com.

Lam Peng Er is a Senior Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. He obtained his PhD from Columbia University. His latest sole-authored book is *Japan's Peace-building Diplomacy in Asia: Seeking a more active political role* (Routledge, 2009).

Terence Lee is an Associate Professor and Chair of Communication and Media Studies at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia. He writes and muses about media, culture and politics in Singapore and 'Australasia'. He is joint editor of *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia* (Routledge, 2008), and author of *The Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore* (Routledge, 2010).

Can-Seng Ooi, PhD, is a sociologist and an Associate Professor at Copenhagen Business School. Before he left for Europe in 1996, he worked as a sociologist at HDB. His research covers many aspects of Singaporean society, including the consequences of the city-state's cultural policies, branding strategies, tourism plans, social engineering mechanisms and electoral system.

Eugene K B Tan is Assistant Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University where he teaches constitutional and administrative law, and ethics and social responsibility. His research interests include the government and politics of Singapore, law and policy, and ethnic conflict regulation.

Kevin Y L Tan is Adjunct Professor at the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, as well as at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He has written and edited some 25 books on law, history and politics, including *Introduction to Singapore's Constitution* (Talisman, 2010); *Constitutional Law in Malaysia & Singapore* (with Thio Li-ann) (LexisNexis, 2010); and *Marshall of Singapore: A Biography* (ISEAS, 2009).

Krystal Tan has just completed her GCE 'A' level examinations and is awaiting entry to university where she will study business management.

Bridget Welsh is Associate Professor in Political Science at Singapore Management University where she teaches courses on comparative politics, parties, political participation, gender and international relations. Her recent publications include *Reflections: The Mahathir Years* (Johns Hopkins, 2004); *Legacy of Engagement in Southeast Asia* (ISEAS, 2008); and *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore* (NUS Press, 2009).

POLITICAL SHIFT:
Singapore's 2011 General Election

Kevin YL Tan & Terence Lee

Political Shift: Singapore's 2011 General Election

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HISTORY NOW

On 7 May 2011, Singaporean politics came of age. History was made. Although the People's Action Party (PAP) was predictably returned to power, not much else was predictable about Singapore's 12th general election. More importantly, the election saw a level of political engagement, mobilisation and sense of ownership hitherto unseen since independence. For a month before the polls and, surely, for a very long time after, politics was the major topic of conversation and discussion among Singaporeans of all ilk.

The results – modest in terms of oppositional gains — catalysed a profound political change unimaginable in the fortnight before Polling Day. True, bookmakers expected a tough fight in Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC). After all, Workers' Party (WP) secretary-general Low Thia Khiang left his Hougang constituency – where he had been MP for 20 years – to helm the WP team there, which was already seen as outstanding, with heavyweights like Sylvia Lim and Chen Show Mao. But even the most prescient bookie could not have predicted the emphatic nature of the PAP's defeat there, nor the resignation of Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister (SM) Goh Chok Tong a week later, nor the stepping down of Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng and ministers Mah Bow Tan and Raymond Lim less than a fortnight hence.

A watcher of omens might say that the writing was on the wall; the signs were all there. Consider this: just one day after Nomination Day, the blockbuster movie, Thor – based on Marvel's best-selling comic of the arrogant Norse God — premiered in Singapore. The significance of Thor? It so happens that his weapon of choice is the hammer – the very symbol of the Workers' Party. And a day before

Polling Day, racing writer Michael Lee correctly predicted a win for the horse named Secret Party in his cheekily titled article 'New Party gets the vote'. In all, 7 of the 19 cabinet ministers in the previous cabinet made way for new faces — the most drastic and dramatic cabinet shuffle in recent memory. And barely two weeks after the election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong appointed an independent committee to undertake a review of ministerial salaries. A fortnight after Polling Day, sages were retired and sacred cows were up for slaughter.

What did and does GE2011 mean for Singapore? There is a famous story of how Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai was asked for his assessment of the French Revolution, and he responded by saying that it was still too early to tell. Since we are unlikely to live that long, we will hazard some conclusions here. This volume presents a snapshot analysis of the election, seen in the immediate fortnight after the votes were counted. Perspectives on the various issues and of the contributors are necessarily immediate and raw since time did not afford us the luxury of leisurely reflection. That said, we believe it presents an important perspective of the here and now. An account of the election written during and shortly after its completion necessarily takes in the most salient issues seen from this vantage point. A lot of it is noise and will probably not matter when we look at the same event 20 years from now. Nevertheless, we believe that this account offers the reader an opportunity to savour the excitement, the promises and potential of what GE2011 meant to the Singaporean public at the time of the election.

THE LOSS OF ALJUNIED GRC

The PAP's electoral performance in GE2011 was, by any standard, an outstanding one. Aided by the simple plurality (first-past-the-post) system of voting, it secured 81 out of the 87 seats in parliament. It had only lost 2 seats in the previous election, but in numerical terms, the loss was small. Going beyond the surface of these statistics, the reader will quickly realise that the massive victory of the PAP did not come easy. The opposition were not

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Workers' Party wins Aljunied GRC; PAP vote share dips to 60.1%

content to let the PAP form the government on Nomination Day as they did in the past, through the use of what came to be known as the 'by-election' strategy. Instead, they chose to contest all but 5 seats in Tanjong Pagar GRC, thus offering numerous Singaporeans the opportunity to exercise their right to vote for the very first time. In previous elections, collegial banter would be along the lines of 'Are you able to vote?' or 'Got chance to vote or not?' This time round, the conversation generally began with 'Do you live in Tanjong Pagar?' Banished was the idea that the opposition would not risk losing key politicians by placing them in GRCs since no opposition had ever won a GRC in the past. This time, the opposition

was going for broke, or at least, the WP was. By leaving his ward of 20 years and moving over to lead the WP's team in Aljunied GRC, Low Thia Khiang was prepared to risk it all.

Going into GE2011, the PAP had clearly expected a swing of votes against them. After all, indicators showed that many Singaporeans were unhappy with the skyrocketing cost of public housing, overcrowded public transport and an increasingly unaffordable cost of living in Singapore. They prepared for this by increasing the number of Single Member Constituencies (SMCs), from 9 to 12. This is significant as it indicated the PAP was willing to lose up to 12 of the 87 seats to the opposition, given that SMCs were easier to win than GRCs. If the PAP were

prepared to lose up to a dozen seats, why then was there so much handwringing and angst when they lost only 6 seats?

The answer is simple. The PAP's losses were in a GRC and not in the SMCs. Since the introduction of the GRC scheme in 1988, the PAP had built the GRCs into citadels of political power. With a free hand to determine the size of each GRC and the almost absolute discretion afforded the Prime Minister's Office in drawing and redrawing electoral boundaries, the PAP was able to keep the opposition from seriously contesting GRCs. The size of GRCs was increased from 3 in 1988 to a maximum of 6 in 1997. The emplacement of 'strong' PAP candidates (erstwhile cabinet ministers or potential ministers) in GRCs ensured their election and the unassailability of the GRCs. Weak or unpopular candidates, who were unlikely to hold their own in one-to-one contests in SMCs, were brought in on the coat-tails of primary vote-getters and popular or highly-respected ministers. This system worked to the PAP's advantage and would continue to work to their advantage so long as opposition parties continued to regard GRCs as 'unbreachable fortresses'. The myth of invincibility was exploded by the WP victory in Aljunied GRC. Immediately, the problems with GRCs came to the fore.

How will the PAP win back Aljunied GRC now that its three star candidates – George Yeo, Lim Hwee Hua and Zainul Abidin Rasheed – have retired from politics? Who will they send in to helm a team strong enough to displace the WP in the next election? Can the PAP afford to send in two more high-powered ministers from outside the ward to challenge Low and his team there? Sure, but what if they lose too? Can the PM afford to lose more generals? What about the

boundaries of Aljunied? Will they be redrawn to neutralise the WP or to bring in pro-PAP precincts to bolster PAP support in the ward? Sure, but can the PAP bear the risk that parts to be carved out or added to the current constituency's territories might just as well be 'infected' by the anti-PAP sentiments in Aljunied? Will Aljunied become a poisoned chalice for the PAP?

The battle for Aljunied once again highlighted the main weakness of the GRC system — the 'coat-tails effect'. While a strong vote-getting minister may succeed in bringing into parliament a coterie of unknown and untested candidates, GE2011 also showed that the perceived poor performance of the lead minister could just as easily jeopardise his or her team's chances of doing well. Two of the worst performing GRCs were helmed by ministers

handling ministries in charge of issues that upset most Singaporeans — housing and transport. Mah Bow Tan, who helmed the Tampines GRC as Minister for National Development, secured 57.22% of the vote while the East Coast GRC team, helmed by Raymond Lim (Minister for Transport) did even worse, securing just 54.83% of the vote. The poor performance of Goh Chok Tong's Marine Parade GRC team (56.65%) has been blamed on newcomer Tin Pei Ling, who proved to be a major political liability for the team. Widely vilified by the public and netizens as shallow, immature and materialistic, Tin was simply no answer to the mature, intelligent and poised Nicole Seah (National Solidarity Party). Clearly, well-regarded and respected ministers win votes — Lee Hsien Loong's Ang Mo Kio GRC scored 69.33% while Tharman Shanmugaratnam's Jurong GRC team scored 66.96% — while unpopular ministers do just the opposite. The sharp contrast drawn between Tin Pei Ling and Nicole Seah, coupled with the defeat of George Yeo in Aljunied, caused many netizens to call for the abolition of the GRC system. Why should they have to live with Tin and lose Yeo? Should the dominant party be at liberty to foist untested, unpopular and inferior candidates on the public by hiding them in the GRCs? And why, some asked, were the two generals (Chan Chun Sing and Tan Chuan-Jin), who should be leading us in battle, hiding in 'safe GRCs'?

Winning elections is not just a simple question of redrawing electoral boundaries. Beyond the battle for votes is the battle for community. The Singapore People's Party (SPP)'s narrow loss in Potong Pasir gave rise to an outpouring of sentiment for Chiam See Tong (and his wife Lina Chiam), who had been Potong Pasir's MP since his election in 1984, and who is the only representative the younger generation of residents have known. Overnight, a large number of residents mounted a petition campaign to force a by-election. Others started a campaign to preserve the vestiges of Chiam's years in Potong Pasir — his beaten-up desk in the void deck of Block 108, where he held his meet-the-people sessions, his chair, the large signboard depicting Chiam against a backdrop of the

characteristic 'ski-slope' flats of Potong Pasir and reading 'Welcome to Potong Pasir Constituency … My Kind of Town.' This phenomenon is not the mere manifestation of a constituency's affection for their former MP, but must be seen as a hankering for a different kind of Singapore town, where life is more relaxed, and where community matters as much as conveniences. The Potong Pasir phenomenon extends beyond its boundaries. Other Singaporeans and former residents of Potong Pasir poured into the town, armed with their digital cameras, to snap up the images of Potong Pasir as it is — before the PAP completely revamps it into 'just another town'.

GENERATIONAL SHIFT

More than any other election, GE2011 signifies the true passing of a generation (or two). All of Singapore's first-generation leaders — who formed the cabinets of 1959 and 1963 — retired from the political scene by the end of the 1980s. Lee Kuan Yew was the exception, remaining as Prime Minister till 1990 and then becoming Senior Minister and Minister Mentor. Despite ceding leadership to Goh Chok Tong, and then to Lee Hsien Loong, he has remained a major political force (some say, the major political force) in Singapore. His commitment to Singapore was so great that he once told an audience that even if he was on his deathbed and being lowered into his grave, he would 'get up' if he felt something was wrong with Singapore. But age and a growing chasm between his aspirations and concerns and those of young Singaporeans have caught up with him. Of course, his remarks about Malay integration in his book *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*, and his warning that voters who opted for the opposition would have five years to 'repent', alienated him (and correspondingly, the PAP) from large segments of the voting public. His retirement from cabinet, alongside that of his successor as prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, signalled the exit of the first two generations of leaders as well.

The passage of time directly affects the electorate in several ways. First, the immediacy of what were major