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Come On And Shout¹

Once in every four to five years a coterie of Singaporeans makes the trek at dusk to the call of a different drum. Getting

"When I first saw the posters of our team up along the streets next to the PM's team, it was surreal. I remember thinking, 'This is it!'"

to the rendezvous involves abandoning vehicular transport

Glenda Han, WP rookie candidate for Ang Mo Kio GRC

and, walking two or three streets before picking their way over pitted paths, untrodden at other times. Outlying

neighbourhoods come alive in the wake of their strides.

"It's more exciting than watching soccer! Of course, lah, the rallies are 'live'."

The occasion is not the World Cup. Quite contrarily, it is

And the speakers are very good. We can tell the candidates are really talking about our lives."

the General Election (GE) and, for the few days leading to

Toh Lam San, ice-cream seller

polling day at least, these regular Singaporeans will behave

irregularly. They will double- and triple-park in car parks

"You know how sometimes you can feel just a little anxious when you have to address a meeting?"

and almost anywhere else. They will climb over ditches and

Well, you're not nervous at the rally.

extend their hands to stragglers. They will press themselves

It's because you're feeling the love, and the connection with the people."

against physical barriers for a chance to pump the palms of

Brandon Siow, candidate for East Coast GRC

compatriots. They will climb 10, 11 floors up a housing block to jostle for a view of the ground below. Or, stand in rain, and, call out: “We love you!” And the reciprocal: “We love you too!” will stir the night. In the aftermath, they will even attempt to write poetry. This is wild territory.² Singaporeans are famously *bochap*³. You couldn’t get them moving, unless it is to overtake the motorist in front signalling to change lane. From time to time, a parent may be known to pummel the fellow attempting to jump queue outside the fast food chain for a ‘Hello Kitty’ freebie for one of two children. Or, for free textbooks. But, no, other than these, there are not many occasions when Singaporeans will make a ruckus over other Singaporeans. As word of mouth goes, however, Singaporeans have always been drawn to opposition rallies.⁴ The ruling party shrugs a machismo shoulder every time,

“Even if cannot hear, you can see and feel how excited the crowd is in front of you. The feeling is contagious.”

Ang Chee Tiong, ice-cream seller

“Politics affect our everyday life. To be apathetic is like going to the barber and letting him do what he likes.”

Tan Chi Wai, WP helper

putting it down to their opponents’ predilection for playing to the crowd. “It’s the theatre,” they say, simultaneously denying their challengers any claim to substance and dismissing the emotional resonance of their tenor⁵. And critics will concur. After all, high profile murder trials are also known to draw the crowds. The actual scale of the Singaporean’s wayward ways at elections when revealed, for the first time during GE2006, in a now famous image, astonishes even the veterans among opposition politicians. The younger cohorts chortle after the fact: “We knew it was big, but we didn’t know it was that big!”⁶

“It was magical at Serangoon Stadium. I could finally see the people!

In all our previous rallies we could never see them because we never had enough lights.”

Sylvia Lim, WP Chairman on the final rally at Serangoon Stadium

“From our balcony, we could see hordes of people walking up waving their WP flags and placards. It was just a sea of people.”

Freda Tan, Hougang resident

A Picture To Launch A Thousand Ships

Yawning Bread scribe Alex Au climbs 13 floors of a HDB block for the picture that could, arguably, launch a thousand ships for our collective imagination. If the photograph were

a mirror, Singaporeans are confronted with a reflection we can hardly be expected to recognise. The overhead shot of the Workers' Party April 30 rally at Hougang, posted on www.yawningbread.org (internet site Au founded), is among the first hard evidence confronting Singaporeans with a little known and, till now, uncelebrated view of the tribe. Captured from a distance and under long exposure, the image could pass for some aberrant constellation until closer examination reveals the astonishing density of humans gathered there (p. 10). The actual "swarm" Au reports on his site is, "wider than my widest lens". By his calculation, and he shares his math, there are between 100,000 and 120,000 people in his picture. A similarly striking image of a WP rally at Ang Mo Kio is captured by Au a few days later, showing a thick current of humans winding into another densely

packed field (p. 14). These images are portentous in the story they tell of the magnitude of Singaporeans showing up at opposition rallies. Together they offer the rare sign of an active citizenry mobilising for no more than a chance to hear what the opposition has to say. The result is a palpable, even infectious, excitement that spills over from the virtual space onto the concrete pavements. Among the proliferation of images by an agog internet community, Au's record of the April 30 rally is emblematic. Never before have Singaporeans been privy to such a confounding view of themselves. To appreciate the significance of the image and its impact on the Singaporean viewer, one has to return to that other more familiar image — the 'eunuch descendant' of the 1995 Kuo Pao Kun play. In a scene describing the castration of the eunuch admiral⁷ Kuo holds up a more disturbing mirror

than what the internet is making available. Putting it plainly in a subsequent interview, Kuo says: “We live in a society that massages us.” “I think Singaporeans are still not politically aware. They’re still going for short-term benefits. Very sad.” The result of this lulling manipulation is likely, never more summarily immortalised than in the inimitable rant of another of Singapore’s own, the music columnist/DJ/social commentator, X’ho. In his 2002 book, *Attack of the S.M. Space Encroachers*, the commentator with an X’ totes up a familiar list of the Singaporean traits: “*kiasu*, 70-year-old man at WP Open House selfish, apathetic, cynical, defensive and guarded, often “At one carpark, there were cars parked abreast of each other even on the ramp!” hypocritical, paranoid, judgemental...”⁸ The Singaporean is often found complicit in the caricature of an apathetic self, Someone said he saw the police tried to intervene, threatening to clamp the wheels of some vehicles. motivated only by self-interest. However, the signs are that once in four or five years, the Singaporean is not beneath shedding skin. For most of the nine days in late April and early May 2006 the sky opens on the country preparing for its

11th GE with the full notoriety of the inter-monsoon season. The days are marked, almost without fail, by fierce afternoon downpours, with the elements increasing in intensity as evening approaches. Recalling his first campaign experience, Workers’ Party (WP) candidate for East Coast GRC⁹, Chia Ti Lik, quips: “Every day, as the day wore on, the light got darker, the weather wetter and the temperature colder!” According to the weather station, outdoor activities during the period are best scheduled for after 10 p.m. when the weather abates or, better still, put off till February when it is more ready to accommodate. For the various parties gearing up for contest for the vote, there is little choice. Opposition members, “I found an earthworm in my jeans coming home from one of the WP rallies!” especially, find themselves wedged between a rock and a wet place. The nine days from when their nominations are accepted until polling day are all they have to convince voters

of their worth.¹⁰ To top it off, nightly rallies are stipulated by law to be between 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. Chia's teammate, Eric Tan, recalls a poignant moment in the run-up to D-day when candidates and their public stand face-to-face in the rain at East Coast Park. He says with an economy of words: "There they were and there we were." When pressed for more, he says: "We didn't feel we could use umbrellas when so many of them were standing there without." It is teammate, Brandon Siow, who makes sure common sense prevails in the end. Siow explains: "There were more rallies to go before polling day, we couldn't afford for anyone to fall sick!" Accordingly, umbrellas are opened for the line-up of candidates waiting their turn on stage. At the podium, however, individual candidates persist in addressing the crowd, blanketed in rain. The stuff of theatre, perhaps. But there is no denying

"Some planning, a lot of leg work and improvisation on demand!"

Png, WP helper on his campaign experience

"On the stage, I had flashes of the time when I first embarked on joining the party."

I didn't know what was to come. What kind of impact we could make."

Sylvia Lim on the final WP rally at Serangoon Stadium

"What captivated me was the crowd... Then I looked up at the surrounding HDB. What I saw stunned me."

Every window of every flat, every stairwell and common corridor with a view of the rally ground was lined with people.

Not just one row but several rows deep. They stayed throughout the rally."

Russell Heng, researcher

the solidarity engendered by such moments. Recovering his tongue, Tan conjures the following picture of an earlier part of the evening: "On one side was the shoreline; on the other, soggy ground. The sea was foaming. The wind was blowing. Our hearts were sinking. There were no bus services. No trains. Nowhere that people could sit, no shelter except the one for the police crew video-taping proceedings. We thought we were done for. Who would come?" Here, he pauses before continuing: "And then we saw them: climbing over barriers, slipping... It was a great sight to behold."¹¹

"After we spoke, we heard the first applause coming from in front of us."

When that was dying down, we heard,

rolling in from the back

the next wave and

the next and the next.

It was then we looked at each other and said,

'It was THAT big!'"

Chia Ti Lik, WP candidate for East Coast GRC

The Wild Wild Net: Seeing is Believing

As noted before, away from the physical elements, this phenomenal aberration is fleshing out on the virtual highways of the internet. Between April 20 and Polling Day on May 6,