

SINGAPORE IN 2019

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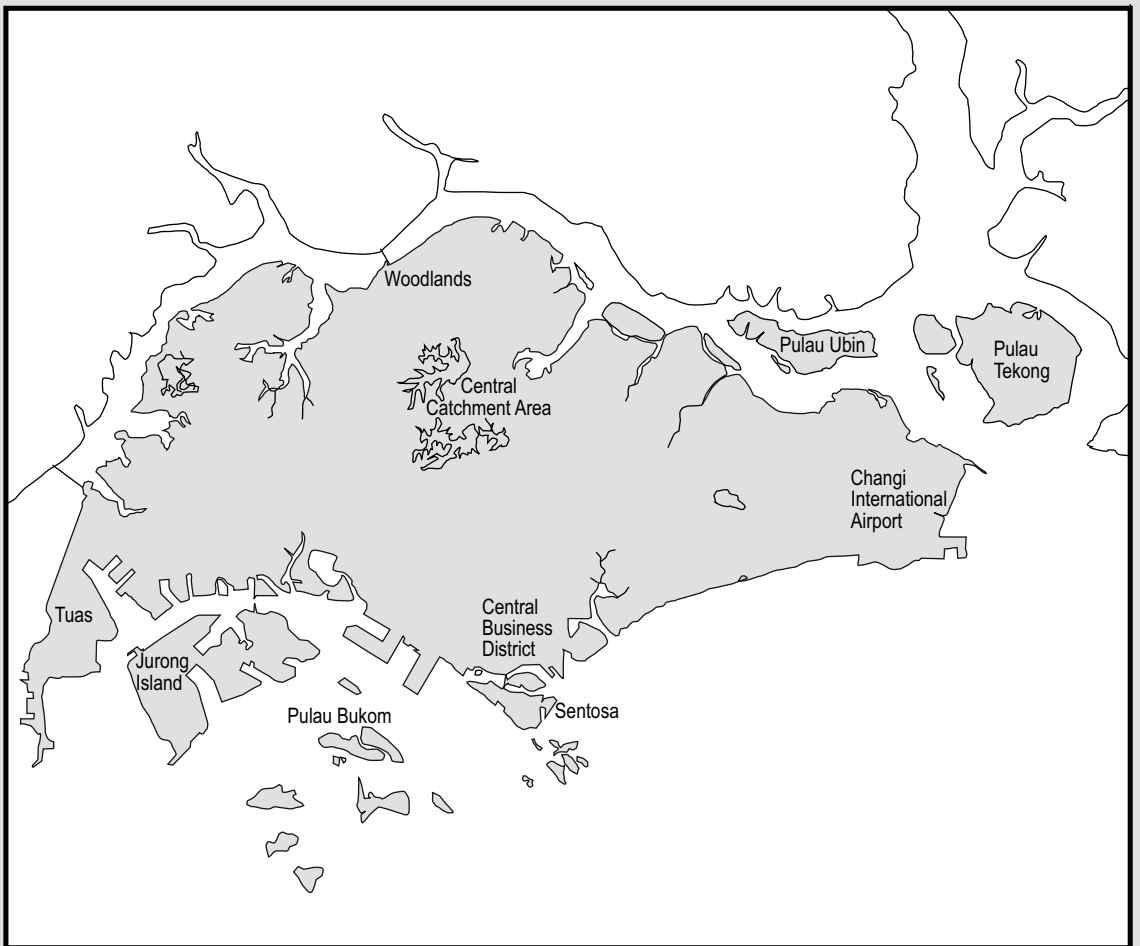
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# Singapore





# SINGAPORE IN 2019: In Holding Pattern

Khairulanwar Zaini

## **A Nation Awaits**

Frequent travellers flying to Changi Airport may occasionally find their aircraft caught in a holding pattern, as their flight circles the airport while waiting for clearance to land. Singapore in 2019 appears to be in a similar holding pattern as the country awaits an election that is coming sooner rather than later. Although the current parliamentary term only expires in April 2021, the Election Department's announcement on 4 September 2019 about the formation of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) was the first—and clearest—sign of an impending election. Convened by the prime minister prior to every general election, the EBRC is tasked with determining the number of parliamentary seats and delineating the electoral map of constituencies, taking into account demographic changes and shifts in the residential housing populations.<sup>1</sup> The committee of five senior civil servants was also instructed to increase the number of single-member wards while reducing the average size of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs).<sup>2</sup> In the past, the committee has taken between three weeks and seven months to issue its report to the prime minister, who would then generally call for an election soon after.<sup>3</sup> This time, however, the committee was reported to be still in the midst of deliberations as of early January 2020,<sup>4</sup> suggesting that the next election will only be likely to be called in the second quarter of 2020 or later, after the conclusion of the Budget and Committee of Supply debates in February 2020.

## **The PAP Continues Apace with Its Leadership Transition**

As part of its preparations for the elections, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has taken steps to consolidate its fourth-generation (4G) leadership as

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong moves ahead with his plans to step down after the next election. After being appointed as the PAP's first assistant secretary-general in November 2018, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat was elevated to deputy prime minister in April 2019, in a further affirmation to the public and the international community of his status as heir apparent.<sup>5</sup> In order to facilitate this leadership renewal, the two incumbent deputy prime ministers—Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam—relinquished their positions and were appointed as senior ministers, while retaining their roles as coordinating minister for national security and coordinating minister for social policies, respectively. By convention, the Cabinet is generally served by two deputy prime ministers, but this particular reshuffle makes Heng the first solo deputy prime minister since 1985, firmly indicating his position as *primus inter pares* in the 4G leadership team. In his new role, Heng is expected to review the long-term policy challenges confronting Singapore, including managing an ageing population and future-proofing the country's economy.<sup>6</sup> He has also mooted the Singapore Together movement, which is intended "to allow regular citizens to play a part in the policymaking process".<sup>7</sup> Heng will be hoping that this new platform will be able to reprise the success of the Our Singapore Conversation, the consultative dialogue exercise held under his leadership in 2012 and which positioned him as a frontrunner in the prime ministerial race.

Prior to his entry into politics, Heng was a senior mandarin in the bureaucracy, rising to the rank of permanent secretary at the Ministry of Trade and Industry in 2001 before serving as the managing director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, Singapore's central bank, from 2005 to 2011. Lauded for his leadership potential when he was introduced as a PAP candidate in the 2011 elections, he was then immediately appointed as education minister, thus being only the second person in Singapore's political history to be directly elevated to a full ministerial role upon being elected as a Member of Parliament (MP).<sup>8</sup> His political ascendancy was temporarily interrupted by a stroke in May 2016, but he was able to recover and resume his duties by August 2016. Since assuming the finance portfolio from Shanmugaratnam in 2015, Heng has designed government Budgets reflecting "a shift away from a top-down model of government to one that seeks to develop stronger partnerships" with the private sector and institutes of higher learning in an effort to give them "more skin in the game in transforming the economy".<sup>9</sup> A recurrent feature of Heng's Budgets are "co-investment schemes" that allocate matching government funding in order to grow local enterprises. For instance, in the 2019 Budget, Heng provided a further injection of S\$100 million (US\$72 million) to the Co-Investment Programme (CIP) to nurture "deep enterprise capabilities"

in the domestic corporate sector.<sup>10</sup> The expanded CIP follows the International Partnership Fund introduced in the 2017 Budget that allocated SG\$600 million (US\$430 million) for the government to “co-invest with Singapore-based firms to help them scale-up and internationalise”,<sup>11</sup> as well as the implementation of a working capital loan scheme for small-and-medium local enterprises (SMEs) in the 2016 Budget.<sup>12</sup> As Lin Suling, executive editor of Singapore’s Channel NewsAsia, writes, the preference to “rally others towards common goals” emblematic of Heng’s Budgets indicates that citizens can expect a “collaborative” style of governance under his future premiership.<sup>13</sup>

However, while Heng is often touted as “a safe pair of hands”,<sup>14</sup> there have been minor concerns expressed by some observers that he has yet to sharpen his political instincts to complement his technocratic acumen. An Australian-based Singaporean academic once described Heng as a “political cleanskin” who “does not usually play the role of an attack dog in parliament”,<sup>15</sup> and his seeming inexperience with such a role briefly emerged in a November 2019 parliamentary sitting. Upon the conclusion of a civil trial in October 2019 that found three opposition Workers’ Party (WP) MPs liable for the misuse of their town council funds, Heng advanced a parliamentary motion on 5 November 2019 calling upon two of the MPs to recuse themselves from the town council’s financial matters.<sup>16</sup> His performance was however seen as unconvincing, with one news editor recounting that Heng “hummed and hawed, flipping through his folder”,<sup>17</sup> while another online media platform reported that Heng “appeared unsure” and was forced to call for a recess soon after introducing the motion when it was suggested that the matter may be *sub judice* since the WP MPs planned to appeal the judgment.<sup>18</sup> Heng took a backseat after the recess, allowing his junior parliamentary colleagues to instead front the assault against the WP. While the motion passed comfortably given the PAP’s significant parliamentary majority, it prompted a commentary pleading for Heng to “raise his game”.<sup>19</sup> With Heng expected to play a leading role in the upcoming elections, and the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated and demanding electorate, it behoves him and his fellow 4G leaders to be as politically nimble as they are economically astute.

## The WP Fights for Its Future

In 2019, the Workers’ Party, the only parliamentary opposition party, had its preparations for the elections complicated by legal woes arising from its appointment of FM Solutions & Services (FMSS) without a tender in 2011.<sup>20</sup> The party had picked FMSS to serve as the managing agent of the newly established

Aljunied-Hougang town council (AHTC) almost immediately after winning the multi-member Aljunied ward in the May 2011 elections.<sup>21</sup> The PAP government raised concerns about possible conflicts of interests since the two shareholders of FMSS—a husband-and-wife team who were supporters of the WP and who had previously worked with the party’s Hougang town council—also held crucial appointments in the new town council.<sup>22</sup> Audits by the Auditor-General’s Office and accounting firm KPMG flagged issues with the town council’s governance and the possibility of “improper payments”, eventually leading to a civil suit against five of Aljunied’s town councillors,<sup>23</sup> including a trio of WP parliamentarians—party chair Sylvia Lim (who was also chair of the town council during the relevant period of FMSS’s tenure from 2011 to 2015), secretary-general Pritam Singh (chair of the town council from 2015 to 2018), and former secretary-general Low Thia Khiang—for breaching their fiduciary duties.<sup>24</sup>

The first tranche of the proceedings was held over seventeen days in October 2018 to determine whether the town councillors could be held liable for the “improper payments” to FMSS, amounting to some S\$33.7 million (US\$24.2 million). A final summation was conducted in April 2019. The High Court released its 329-page judgment in October 2019, determining that Lim and Low had “failed to act in the best interests of the town council and breached their fiduciary duty” in hiring FMSS without a tender, while finding Singh lacking in his duty of care and skill in not questioning the decision.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the judge declared that the trio was responsible for “systemic control failures” in the town council.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the three parliamentarians are personally on the hook for damages suffered by the town council arising from the payments to FMSS, although the exact quantum that can be exacted from the trio has to be determined in a second tranche of hearings. During the trial, lawyers for the WP MPs insisted that only S\$15,710 (US\$11,000), rather than the full S\$33.7 million, is recoverable since the payments from the town council’s purse to FMSS were for services that the town council did indeed receive.<sup>27</sup> The precise amount that Lim, Low and Singh are personally liable for will have significant repercussions on their own political futures and that of their party’s—if they are not able to pay, the three will be declared bankrupt and thus disqualified from Parliament. However, the timeline for the second round of hearings has not been decided, especially since the three WP parliamentarians have filed their appeal against the High Court judgment on 11 November 2019.<sup>28</sup> This increases the likelihood that the WP will have to contend with a cloud of legal uncertainty while contesting the forthcoming election, with the PAP expected to capitalize on the issue and accuse the WP of financial mismanagement.

Following the November 2019 parliamentary motion calling for Lim and Low to withdraw from AHTC's financial affairs, the town councillors held a secret ballot and voted 17–1 against the need for the duo's recusal.<sup>29</sup> (Lim and Low did not participate in the vote.) However, the two were eventually issued with a rectification order by the minister for national development, Lawrence Wong, on 3 January 2020 to restrict their financial involvement in the town council,<sup>30</sup> which they have agreed to comply with despite reservations about "the propriety of the order".<sup>31</sup> In facing such political headwinds, the WP can however take comfort that there is no indication of widespread dissatisfaction or anger against the party among its constituents. Interviews conducted by national broadsheet the *Straits Times* with twenty Aljunied and Hougang residents after the release of the judgment revealed that most "were not surprised by the verdict, but hoped that the outcome would not disqualify the trio from being MPs".<sup>32</sup> Such sentiments fall in line with the success of the three parliamentarians in raising more than S\$1 million (US\$717,000) in a span of four days following an October 2018 "online crowdsourcing appeal" to defray their legal costs.<sup>33</sup> This suggests that while the WP may take a temporary hit from the outcome of the trial, it still retains a popular following and a reservoir of goodwill among supporters who are sympathetic to the difficulties that a relatively small opposition party such as the WP would encounter, especially given the logistical magnitude of running a large town council.

## The Rest of the Opposition Chases an Alliance

Beyond the WP, the opposition scene was galvanized by the formal registration of the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) in April 2019. The new party is led by former PAP parliamentarian Tan Cheng Bock, who, in representing the single-member ward of Ayer Rajah from 1980 until his retirement in 2006, had consistently secured at least 70 per cent of the vote in each of his electoral contests.<sup>34</sup> Despite being a member of the PAP's all-important central executive committee from 1987 to 1996, he developed a reputation as a maverick with an independent streak, particularly for his vocal opposition to the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme introduced by the PAP government.<sup>35</sup> In 2011 he resigned from the PAP in order to contest the non-partisan presidential election, facing off against one-time colleague and former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, the government's preferred candidate. In a four-way contest, Tan Cheng Bock managed to muster 738,311 votes (34.85 per cent) against Tony Tan's 745,693 votes (35.20 per cent), thus only losing by the narrow margin of 7,269 votes (0.34 per cent). This



formidable electoral performance, achieved without the backing of the PAP's party machinery, testifies to Tan's enduring popularity and credentials as one of the best-performing political candidates in Singapore's election history.

Tan's formal entry into opposition politics has thus kindled considerable optimism and excitement, with some drawing parallels to Mahathir's defection to the Pakatan Harapan coalition in neighbouring Malaysia and expecting Tan to "split the People's Action Party's vote".<sup>36</sup> However, it is more likely that the PSP will find it difficult to make a significant dent in the PAP's parliamentary dominance, let alone displace the ruling party, even if it stands a fighting chance in the constituencies of western Singapore surrounding Tan's former stronghold of Ayer Rajah.<sup>37</sup> During the PSP's public launch in June 2019, Tan dismissed talk of regime change or prime ministerial aspirations, stating instead his modest hope of denying the PAP a two-thirds parliamentary majority, the threshold required to amend the constitution.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the year, comparisons to Mahathir also fed intense speculation that Tan could lead a grand alliance of opposition parties against the PAP in the coming election. However, despite a much-publicized "opposition alliance meeting" between Tan and the leadership of seven other opposition parties in November 2019,<sup>39</sup> there remains little indication that Tan has the appetite to helm a coalition of often-fractious minor opposition parties. The lack of progress has prompted four of these parties—the Singaporeans First party, the Reform Party, the People's Power Party and the Democratic Progressive Party—to announce in early January 2020 their plans to register a formal alliance in order to contest the next election under a unified banner. The four parties have also indicated that they welcome the participation of other opposition parties and remain open to Tan leading the alliance if he is so willing.<sup>40</sup> Thus far, the Singapore People's Party (SPP) has formally declined to join the alliance, as the party seeks to regroup under its new leadership after Chiam See Tong, a veteran opposition MP who represented the ward of Potong Pasir from 1984 to 2011, relinquished his position as secretary-general in October 2019 because of ill health.<sup>41</sup> The SPP's decision to sit out the new alliance highlights the party's dwindling fortunes since its heyday in the early 2000s when Chiam spearheaded the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), the most recent attempt at an opposition coalition prior to the one mooted in January 2020.<sup>42</sup>

As the election looms, the frantic pursuit of a grand opposition alliance may prove to be the equivalent of political busywork: fostering merely the illusion of progress rather than substantively improving the electability of the opposition or expanding the country's democratic space. This is especially so as the more established opposition parties such as the WP and the Singapore Democratic Party

(SDP) remain absent from such arrangements. While the SDP had affirmed the need for an alliance under Tan Cheng Bock as recently as August 2019,<sup>43</sup> and has participated in inter-party talks, it remains to be seen whether party chief Chee Soon Juan would be willing to follow the directions of the head of a different opposition party, especially if it entails reining in his and his party's autonomy and downplaying the distinctive identity that the SDP has cultivated over the years as a champion of liberal democracy and human rights. The WP, meanwhile, remains sceptical of opposition alliances, preferring instead to organically grow itself on its own terms and stead.

### **The PAP Government Works to Burnish its Performance Legitimacy**

Competent economic stewardship and effective governance are crucial ingredients for the legitimacy of a political regime that promises material security in return for strict political and social control. Singapore, however, experienced only tepid economic growth in 2019, narrowly avoiding a technical recession in the third quarter.<sup>44</sup> Flash government figures also revealed that the economy expanded by only 0.7 per cent year-on-year in 2019, the slowest pace since the meagre growth of 0.1 per cent in 2009.<sup>45</sup> The slowdown in the country's growth was attributed to an "external, manufacturing, trade-driven weakness" wrought by global uncertainties arising from the trade dispute between the United States and China.<sup>46</sup> The effects of the economic slowdown was most evident in the manufacturing sector, which generally contributes around 20 to 25 per cent of the country's annual gross domestic product, as it shrank by 3.5 per cent on a year-on-year basis by the third quarter of 2019.<sup>47</sup> Prime Minister Lee however assured citizens in his annual New Year's remarks on 31 December 2019 that the "economy is still growing, [albeit] less vigorously than we would like".<sup>48</sup> Although many challenges remain, the trade and industry ministry has forecast growth of between 0.5 and 2.5 per cent for 2020,<sup>49</sup> prompting expectations that the government will pursue "a highly expansionary fiscal policy" in order to reach the forecasted rates in the coming year.<sup>50</sup> The fiscal pump-priming will likely be done in tandem with the provision of monetary handouts to the citizenry that has often characterized the government's pre-election Budgets.

The 2019 Budget was initially viewed by some as an "election Budget" because of its generous provisions,<sup>51</sup> including the Bicentennial Bonus that disburses a total of S\$1.1 billion (US\$787 million) in cash vouchers, tax rebates, top-ups to citizens' education accounts, and pension supplements, with the benefits mostly

accruing to lower-income and older Singaporeans.<sup>52</sup> The cornerstone of the 2019 Budget was however the Merdeka Generation Package (MGP), an S\$8 billion (US\$5.7 billion) healthcare aid programme aimed at subsidizing the medical expenses of the 500,000-odd Singaporean senior citizens born in the 1950s.<sup>53</sup> First announced by Prime Minister Lee in August 2018, the MGP extends and complements the S\$9 billion (US\$6.4 billion) Pioneer Generation Package (PGP), a similar social welfare scheme unveiled in 2014 to assist citizens born prior to 1950 with their retirement and healthcare needs. The implementation of the MGP and PGP could create the expectation, as George Wong and Woo Jun Jie reflect in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, that “there will be future packages waiting for succeeding generations”.<sup>54</sup> The packages may also be signalling a gradual evolution of the country’s social welfare regime. In the fifty-odd years since independence, the PAP government has adopted a strict “anti-welfare development model”,<sup>55</sup> in which direct welfare support is eschewed and social expenditures are channelled in a “productivist” direction towards education and workfare schemes that could stimulate economic growth.<sup>56</sup> In such a “productivist” welfare regime, the primary purpose of social policies is enhancing human capital rather than ensuring social security. However, programmes such as the PGP and MGP are “protective” in the sense of being more concerned with preserving the social welfare of citizens and mitigating the financial risks that they have to bear.<sup>57</sup> The need for structural changes to Singapore’s welfare regime appears unavoidable as issues of socio-economic inequality become increasingly salient and visible. Although household income inequality was reported to be at its lowest level since 2001,<sup>58</sup> cracks remain. Results of the first-ever academic study of homelessness released in November 2019 revealed that there are around a thousand rough sleepers in Singapore.<sup>59</sup> Education, instead of being an opportunity for social mobility, remains in danger of becoming inequitable as children of the rich are able to move further ahead with the benefit of private tutoring.<sup>60</sup> Concerns also remain about the impact to less-well-off Singaporeans of an impending hike in the regressive goods and services tax from 7 to 9 per cent.<sup>61</sup> The Singapore political leadership have reiterated that they recognize the danger that inequality, if unaddressed, can undermine the country’s social cohesion.<sup>62</sup> Less often discussed is how inequality also poses a threat to the PAP government’s performance legitimacy and its ideology of meritocracy. Refining the country’s welfare regime towards a more “protective” orientation—which means responding to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized citizens rather than questioning whether they are deserving of help—may thus be the pragmatic move for the PAP as they seek to retain the affective loyalties of the Singaporean public.

Another significant element of the 2019 Budget was the reduction in the foreign worker quota for the services sector. In 2019, firms in the services sector could fill up to 40 per cent of their workforce with foreigners. This will however be reduced to 38 per cent in 2020, and to 35 per cent in 2021.<sup>63</sup> Other than reducing the economy's reliance on cheaper foreign labour, the PAP must be hoping that the quota cut could forestall immigration from becoming an election issue. During the 2011 elections, anger over the PAP government's open immigration policies, among other things, led to the party's worst-ever performance in the polls, with its share of the total vote plummeting to 60.1 per cent.<sup>64</sup> To its credit the ruling party has since learnt its lessons and has sought to address these issues by carefully calibrating the immigration spigot and ramping up public infrastructure to cope with increases in the resident population.

The Singapore leadership also found itself tightening some bureaucratic processes in 2019 after three major incidents occurred that blemished its reputation for efficient administration. These steps were taken presumably in part to avert the loss of public confidence and trust in the PAP government machinery. The first incident was the death of 28-year-old popular actor Aloysius Pang on 23 January 2019 while he was serving his reservist duty in New Zealand.<sup>65</sup> Coverage of his passing in both the mainstream press and social media prompted concerns about the safety of the military's peacetime training, especially for a conscript army. In a move to reassure the public, the defence ministry announced on 1 February 2019 the formation of an Inspector-General's Office with the power to "scrutinise and enforce safety processes and practices at all levels" of the armed forces.<sup>66</sup>

The two other incidents involved the leaks of confidential medical data. The health ministry revealed on 28 January 2019 that the "confidential information of 14,200 people with HIV, including their names, contact details and medical information, has been stolen and leaked online".<sup>67</sup> The person responsible for the leak, American citizen Mikhy Farrera-Brochez, was able to get hold of the data through his partner, Ler Teck Siang, a Singaporean doctor who, as head of the National Public Health Unit between March 2012 and May 2013, had access to the national HIV Registry.<sup>68</sup> The authorities believe that Ler had downloaded the content of the registry into a thumb drive. As a result of the incident, the health ministry has introduced additional safeguards, which include requiring the permission of at least the director of the Communicable Diseases Division to download the HIV Registry, instituting a "two-person approval process" for access to the HIV Registry, and establishing a dedicated workstation for managing HIV Registry data.<sup>69</sup> However, the health ministry faced criticism for not being forthright with the public after it emerged that the authorities had been aware as early as

2016 that the registry had been compromised. In Parliament, health minister Gan Kim Yong defended the “judgment call” not to go public about the breach—a decision taken twice, in 2016 and 2018—on the grounds that the ministry wanted to protect the interests and well-being of the people on the registry.<sup>70</sup>

The second data leak concerned the personal information of around 800,000 blood donors in Singapore. The Health Science Authority, which supervises the national blood bank, disclosed on 15 March 2019 that one of its third-party vendors had accidentally released the database online for close to two months; no sensitive medical information was however divulged.<sup>71</sup> These two incidents, as a former technology correspondent for the *Straits Times* argued, seem to indicate a “systemic issue” in which “measures you expect the government to take to protect confidential data are not there”.<sup>72</sup> The data leaks came on the heels of the June 2018 cyberattack on SingHealth, the country’s largest public health organization. The hackers, which IT security research firm Symantec later identified to be from “a state-sponsored espionage group” called Whitefly,<sup>73</sup> collected the personal information of 1.5 million patients, while specifically targeting Prime Minister Lee’s personal particulars and prescription records.<sup>74</sup> These vulnerabilities suggest that as Singapore embraces digital technology in its pursuit of becoming a “Smart Nation”, and more information about citizens are collated and held by the government, commensurate efforts must be undertaken to preserve the security and privacy of the data.

## POFMA Is the Law of the Land

Following from the March 2018 public hearings by the parliamentary select committee on “deliberate online falsehoods”, the PAP government introduced a bill empowering it to combat fake news in April 2019. The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) enables ministers to issue either a correction or takedown order against a “false statement of fact”—statutorily defined as “a statement of fact that is false or misleading”—that would be against the public interest to be left unchecked.<sup>75</sup> Ministers can also bar access to websites or accounts propagating falsehoods. There are also provisions allowing individuals to appeal to the courts to overturn the executive orders. In the parliamentary debate, the WP argued that the judiciary is the proper body to determine whether a falsehood has indeed been perpetrated. Accordingly, instead of issuing executive orders, the government should be filing an application with the courts if it wants action to be taken.<sup>76</sup> This was however rebuffed by home affairs and law minister K. Shanmugam, who insisted that the government may

sometimes need to take prompt and immediate action to prevent the viral spread of falsehoods.<sup>77</sup> After two days of hectic deliberations, the bill was passed by Parliament by a 72–9 margin.<sup>78</sup>

After taking effect in October 2019, the law was first invoked on 25 November 2019 against PSP member Brad Bowyer for a 13 November Facebook post of his implying “that the Government controls Temasek and GIC’s commercial decisions”.<sup>79</sup> As of January 2020, there have been at least thirteen POFMA executive orders,<sup>80</sup> dashing hopes that the legislation would be used lightly. Most of these orders have been directed at opposition politicians or anti-establishment critics, prompting debate about whether the law is “protecting the truth” or “restricting free debate”.<sup>81</sup> Instead of complying, some recipients of the executive orders have filed challenges in court,<sup>82</sup> while others—such as blogger Alex Tan and Malaysian human rights group Lawyers for Liberty (LFL)—have chosen to ignore them. Tan, a former opposition candidate based in Australia, runs a website known more for the vehemence rather than the accuracy of its frequent diatribes against the PAP government.<sup>83</sup> After Tan’s refusal to obey a correction direction, the PAP government instead compelled Facebook to issue a correction notice on his website’s Facebook page.<sup>84</sup> After Tan ignored two further correction orders on separate issues, the government designated the Facebook page as a “declared online location”, barring Tan from benefitting monetarily through the page.<sup>85</sup> The social media platform eventually revoked local access to the website’s Facebook page after receiving another POFMA directive, albeit with some reluctance as a Facebook spokesperson expressed concerns that POFMA was becoming a “censorship tool”.<sup>86</sup> In the case of the LFL, a correction order was issued against its website after the group published a statement in January 2020 alleging the use of “brutal execution methods” in Singapore’s Changi Prison.<sup>87</sup> The group’s non-compliance with the order prompted the government to block access to the LFL website in Singapore.<sup>88</sup> The LFL retaliated by filing a civil motion against law and home affairs minister Shanmugam in the Kuala Lumpur High Court. According to the group, it is seeking a judicial declaration that the Singaporean minister “cannot take action against Lawyers of Liberty (LFL) in Malaysia under POFMA”.<sup>89</sup>

## Singapore Balances its Foreign Relations

On the external front, Singapore tried to keep an even keel as it navigated the increasingly tense rivalry between China and the United States. The country did so, as one defence correspondent observed, by being frank in public and private

with both the Americans and Chinese “about the risks of more confrontational U.S.-China relations”.<sup>90</sup> Prime Minister Lee reiterated this theme during the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2019, highlighting how the “mutual lack of strategic trust” hampers the prospect of a “compromise or peaceful accommodation” between the two superpowers.<sup>91</sup> He however emphasized the imperative for both “to reach such an accommodation”, especially since neither country is able to effectively contain, isolate or defeat the other.<sup>92</sup>

On its part, Singapore continued its deep engagement with China and the United States. In April 2019, Lee attended the second Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Forum,<sup>93</sup> while identifying how Singapore could “play a constructive role in financial services, third-country investments and human resources development”.<sup>94</sup> This comes after he was snubbed for the first summit in 2017 as a signal of Chinese displeasure at what they saw as Singapore’s public affirmation of the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling. Relations have clearly improved since that nadir. Singapore upgraded its defence pact with China in October 2019, establishing the possibility of more “frequent high-level dialogues and larger-scale military exercises” between the two countries.<sup>95</sup> A new visiting forces agreement to enable troop exchanges and a mutual logistics support arrangement were also included. This was however not a shift in Singapore’s defence posture in China’s favour. Shortly before signing the Chinese defence pact, Singapore, in September 2019, also extended for another fifteen years the 1990 memorandum granting American forces access to Singapore’s air and naval facilities. The Singapore defence ministry stated that the “milestone renewal” of the agreement “reaffirmed the importance of the US’ continued engagement of the region”.<sup>96</sup> In a similar vein, foreign affairs minister Vivian Balakrishnan had called for a “sustained U.S. presence” in Southeast Asia, especially one with a “more active economic agenda”, during a May 2019 speech to a think-tank in the American capital.<sup>97</sup>

While relations with China and the United States may have consumed the bulk of public attention, Singapore did not neglect its commitments to and partnerships with other external powers. In November 2019, the free trade agreement (FTA) between Singapore and the European Union came into force, after close to a decade in the making.<sup>98</sup> Various Singapore ministers also assiduously tried to cajole India’s participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP),<sup>99</sup> ASEAN’s ambitious bid to consolidate the grouping’s several FTA partners into one gargantuan trade pact. Singapore was also offered access to India’s missile testing facility at Chandipur, which promises to help meet the city-state’s need for overseas training grounds to conduct live-firing exercises with its military assets.<sup>100</sup> In June 2019, Singapore also received the honour of being one

of the eight non-G20 (Group of Twenty) countries to attend the G20 summit in Osaka, at the invitation of host Japan,<sup>101</sup> testifying to the warm relations between Japan and Singapore as well as the island nation's dogged efforts to ensure the relevance of small states.

In terms of regional ties, Singapore was able to smoothen an ongoing maritime and airspace row with Malaysia as it was heading into 2019. The maritime dispute had been triggered by Malaysia's decision on 25 October 2018 to extend the Johor Bahru port limits into what Singapore deemed its territorial waters.<sup>102</sup> After filing a "strong protest" with the Malaysian government, Singapore extended its own port limits to cover the disputed area on 6 December 2018.<sup>103</sup> A month later, on 8 January 2019, in an effort to de-escalate tensions, the foreign ministers of both countries met and established a "working group" to examine the legal and operational aspects of the dispute. Subsequently, in March 2019, both countries reached an agreement to suspend the new port limits and allow the previous boundaries to again apply.<sup>104</sup> While the maritime quarrel was playing out, Malaysia was also raising a hue about the "delegated airspace" of southern Johor, which is under the supervision of Singapore's air traffic control as a result of two agreements signed in 1973 and 1974.<sup>105</sup> The Malaysian transport minister told his parliament on 4 December 2018 that Malaysia was intending to reclaim the southern Johor airspace because of sovereignty concerns.<sup>106</sup> This was on account of the planned implementation by Singapore of Instrument Landing System (ILS) procedures—which provide guidance for flights descending and approaching a runway—for the island state's Seletar Airport. According to the Malaysian transport minister, the ILS procedures would impose height limits on developments in Johor's Pasir Gudang area and they would also affect the shipping operations of the Pasir Gudang Port. In part to prevent the ILS procedures from taking effect, Malaysia designated the airspace over Pasir Gudang as a "permanent restricted area" on 2 January 2019.<sup>107</sup> However, at the same 8 January meeting between the two foreign ministers, both countries consented to a one-month suspension of the ILS procedures and the restriction of the Pasir Gudang airspace.<sup>108</sup> In April 2019 this suspension was made permanent, with the civil aviation agencies of both countries collaborating to develop alternative GPS-based instrument approach procedures for Seletar Airport.<sup>109</sup> Throughout the kerfuffle, Singapore adopted a measured resolve, continually counselling restraint and seeking de-escalation without conceding its interests, while relying on face-to-face ministerial exchanges to rectify the issues. Calmer relations also allowed a modicum of progress on the proposed Rapid Transit System (RTS) link between Johor Bahru and the northern Singapore town of Woodlands. After suspending the project in May 2019 because



of fiscal concerns, the Malaysian prime minister announced on 31 October 2019 that the country would proceed with the cross-border subway connection after being able to reduce the projected costs by a third.<sup>110</sup> However, a few days later, Singapore revealed that Malaysia has requested a further six-month suspension until the end of April 2020,<sup>111</sup> this time “to ensure that the relevant agreements can be amended and signed”.<sup>112</sup> This means that the resumption of the RTS project will come around the same time as Malaysia’s final decision about the fate of the Kuala Lumpur–Singapore high-speed rail (HSR), the construction of which has been postponed to end-May 2020.<sup>113</sup>

Singapore was also briefly embroiled in a diplomatic spat with two fellow ASEAN member states after Prime Minister Lee expressed his condolences on the death of Thailand’s former prime minister Prem Tinsulanonda in June 2019. In his tribute, Lee described how, in the aftermath of Vietnam’s 1978 intervention in Cambodia to depose the Khmer Rouge regime, Prem “worked with ASEAN partners to oppose the Vietnamese occupation in international forums”, which “prevented a military invasion and regime change from being legitimised, and protected the security of other Southeast Asian countries”.<sup>114</sup> References to “invasion” and “occupation” irked both Vietnam and Cambodia: a Vietnamese foreign affairs ministry spokesperson expressed “regret” that Lee’s statement did not “objectively reflect the historical truth”,<sup>115</sup> while Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen accused Lee of supporting the Khmer Rouge genocide.<sup>116</sup> Beyond the rhetorical bluster, however, there was no lasting damage to Singapore’s relationships with the two countries.

## The Kids Are Alright

While lamentations about the political apathy of young Singaporeans may have been de rigueur a few years ago, the online and offline episodes of civic engagement and activism by youths in 2019 on issues of gender, ethnicity and climate change should arrest such complaints. In April 2019, twenty-three-year-old National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Monica Baey took to Instagram to call for a “zero-tolerance policy towards any form of sexual misconduct” after she was filmed in a hostel shower by a fellow student.<sup>117</sup> She revealed that the police gave the perpetrator a twelve-month conditional warning, while the university merely required him “to write an apology letter” and “undergo mandatory counselling”. He was also barred from the hostel and suspended for a semester. The ensuing public outcry following her social media posts impelled NUS into convening a review committee to assess the existing “disciplinary and support frameworks”.<sup>118</sup>

The case also attracted the intervention of education minister Ong Ye Kung, who described the penalties imposed by the university on the perpetrator as “manifestly inadequate”.<sup>119</sup> In June 2019 the university announced it was accepting all the committee’s recommendations, including stiffer penalties.<sup>120</sup>

The second episode took place in June 2019 when controversy erupted over an advertisement featuring a Chinese actor, Dennis Chew, dressed in different costumes to represent characters from Singapore’s major ethnic groups. Chew’s skin was darkened in his portrayal of an Indian man, leading to the accusation that the ad was insensitive to Singapore’s ethnic minorities by peddling in “brownface”.<sup>121</sup> Attention to the ad, which was part of a campaign by local e-payment service provider NETS to encourage cashless transactions, was first flagged on Instagram before going viral on Twitter.<sup>122</sup> The uproar prompted apologies from Chew, state broadcaster Mediacorp (Chew’s employer), NETS, and Havas Worldwide (the creative agency commissioned by NETS and responsible for casting Chew in the ad campaign).<sup>123</sup> Amid the brouhaha, the sibling duo of Preeti and Subhas Nair released a polemical three-minute rap video in response to the ad, which drew the ire of home affairs and law minister Shanmugam. The minister stated that the video “insults Chinese Singaporeans, uses four-letter words on Chinese Singaporeans, vulgar gestures, pointing of middle finger, to make minorities angry with Chinese Singaporeans”, and social media platforms were instructed by the authorities to take down the video.<sup>124</sup> The siblings were issued with a twenty-four-month conditional warning in August 2019 after police investigations.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, the “brownface” saga had the value of advancing the national discourse on race relations and reflecting the changing expectations and norms of intercultural sensitivity, especially with respect to the representation of Singapore’s multi-ethnic and multicultural diversity. The conversations that ensued highlighted how diversity requires more than the tokenistic presence of minority identities, and the importance of respecting the capacity and autonomy for persons to articulate their ethnic and cultural identity on their own terms—to *represent* themselves rather than be *re-presented* by others.

The third major instance of youth activism occurred on a hazy Saturday afternoon in September 2019 when a group of young Singaporeans in their late teens and early twenties organized the inaugural physical mass rally calling for climate change action at Hong Lim Park, the only gazetted area for demonstrations in Singapore.<sup>126</sup> To an audience of two thousand people, including government politicians, speakers at the Singapore Climate Rally (SCR) demanded the government do more in reducing its economic reliance on the fossil fuel industry and in establishing a more robust carbon tax system.<sup>127</sup> The timing of the climate

rally was somewhat fortuitous as it took place shortly after the prime minister's annual national day rally (NDR) speech in late August 2019 that elevated the policy signature of climate change. Although a National Climate Change Secretariat has existed since 2010, Lee's speech elevated climate action into a national priority as he described climate change defence as an "existential" matter for Singapore on par with its military defence. There were however differences in priorities between the prime minister's NDR and the youths' SCR. The former primarily concentrated on *adapting* to the effects of climate change (particularly rising sea levels) through engineering techniques such as land reclamation and empoldering.<sup>128</sup> The latter, meanwhile, emphasized the urgency of *mitigating* climate change through structurally driven reductions in greenhouse emissions.<sup>129</sup> The diverging priorities are best symbolized by the "battle" over Jurong Island, the site of Singapore's petrochemical and refinery facilities. While the PAP government values the offshore island as a crucial component of the Singapore economy, climate activists view it askance for being "responsible for nearly half of national greenhouse emissions".<sup>130</sup> Although the youth climate activists recognize they are unlikely to prevail in their quest to shutter Singapore's petrochemical and refinery sector, one of the SCR organizers revealed that the government has readily engaged environmental groups in discussions and remains open to collaborations.<sup>131</sup> This augurs well for both Singapore's climate and civic futures, even if there is always more to be done.

## 2020 Clarifies

If Singapore in 2019 was about waiting, such patience might bear some fruit, especially if, as widely expected, the country heads to its thirteenth post-independence general elections in 2020. Elections are often clarifying moments, and we will find out whether the PAP government has sufficiently delivered on its promises of efficient and competent governance—in spite of the occasional hiccup—to retain the trust of the electorate. It will disclose whether Heng and his fellow 4G leaders have convinced Singaporeans that they are worthy successors to previous generations of PAP leaders and deserve the mantle of leadership. Thus far, the anointment of Heng as prime-minister-in-waiting has been an internal party affair, but an election will confirm if the succession has the imprimatur of the public. We shall also discover whether the opposition in Singapore will have, if not their own "Mahathir moment", a stronger showing in terms of their popular vote and representation in Parliament despite the significant structural hurdles confronting them. It may also reveal whether the country's fake news law—one of the first such pieces of legislation in the world—is worthy of emulation or

merely another unfortunate instance of the ruling party overreaching. In all, 2020 promises to demonstrate, with some degree of clarity, the state of the body politic in Singapore.

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

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of managing agents hired by PAP town councils. The WP has claimed, for instance, that its appointment of FMSS without a tender was partly precipitated when CPG Facilities Management, the managing agent of PAP-held Aljunied GRC, requested for early termination of its contract after the WP won the ward. (This account was however disputed during court proceedings.) It is also the norm for the town councils of small, single-member constituencies (such as Hougang) to be subsumed within a larger neighbouring ward's town council to achieve economies of scale. For further details about the possible politicization of town councils and the potential difficulties facing opposition parties in managing town councils, see "Town Council Management Should be Depoliticised: Low Thia Khiang", *Today*, 12 February 2015, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/town-council-management-should-be-depoliticised-low-thia-khiang>.

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