



### **Lessons from PAP's defeat in Punggol East**

COMMENT When the votes were counted in this seat of 31,600 voters, the incumbent PAP had experienced an embarrassing loss - the opposition Workers' Party took the seat decisively with a 10.8 percent margin, winning 54.5 percent of the electorate. This was a whopping 13 percent increase in its share of support from the 2011 general election.

This is now the second by-election in two years where the dominant PAP has experienced difficulties at the polls, and the overall trend is one of erosion of support that is gaining momentum.

The Punggol East by-election - in a seat where the PAP had the advantages of incumbency and resources at its disposal - is perhaps the clearest sign that the party is in trouble. Not only is Singapore moving toward a more pluralistic political system, the ruling party is losing ground electorally, particularly among younger Singaporeans.

To understand the results, it is important to appreciate both local dynamics of the contest as well as broader shifts that are taking place in South-East Asia, including Malaysia.

One-party-dominant regimes are struggling in maintaining their political position as their political bases contract and the strategies they are adopting, tied to old practices of politics, are just not making the grade.

## The battle of the sexes

The most apparent factor in this by-election involved a clear call for a different type of representation. The PAP slated a talented surgeon, Dr Koh Poh Koon (*right*), in its old winnable mold of the "bright and the brightest". He was supported by the establishment as PAP leaders came to the ground to back one of their own.

During the campaign it became clearer to the voters that Koh was part of the country's elite. For example, his comments on car ownership - that "everyone in Singapore had a car" and that as professionals he and his wife needed two cars to get to work - backfired. This response brought home the fact that some people are better off than others in Singapore, and created the impression that some were entitled to more.



Given the price of the certificate of entitlement (COE), to own and keep a car on the road costs over S\$100,000 (RM250,000) - and this is one of the cheapest models. Young families cannot afford cars and from Punggol, which is located on the east coast, the travel times to the city can extend beyond an hour. Koh's remarks (literally) drove home the fact that the PAP's chosen elite are not connected to the experience of ordinary Singaporeans.

The issue of representation went further than elitism as voters in Punggol spoke loudly for putting another woman into Parliament. Singapore has now 21 women in Parliament, or 24.1 percent (higher than Malaysia's 9.9 percent). The choice of the Workers' Party to field a woman yielded results.

The PAP responded by urging the people not to vote for "gender per se" and repeatedly call for voters to look at the "qualifications of the candidates". They misunderstood that to diminish the value of women even indirectly is to ask for a response.

The size of the margin can be tied to this factor alone as the PAP forgot the important role that women play as voters and the reality that it is inappropriate to judge the role of women purely on their paper qualifications. Women often work extra "shifts" to take care of the family, and many work part-time to bring in additional income.

Young women in particular step out of the workforce to have a family or take different (more flexible jobs) to balance family obligations, including caring of older parents. Voters in Punggol appreciated that having

another women's voice in Parliament would provide more inputs on policy, and more importantly that the judgment of a person's worth by the degrees they have is inadequate.

Ironically, the entire framing of the PAP campaign was gendered. The main issue that received attention was families, as the government announced a package of policies geared toward promoting the demographic expansion of the "Singaporean core". The package included some excellent initiatives for healthcare of the child after birth (neonatal support) to paternal family leave.



Koh was placed at a disadvantage in articulating these initiatives as the campaign theme spoke directly to the experience of men and women balancing family life. The decisions of women in the family unit were placed centre stage, rather than healthcare or economic policy. Studies show that when woman's issues are prominent in a campaign, this advantages women candidates. The Workers' Party candidate Lee Li Lian had the advantage speaking on the issues as her experience was seen as more "real."

From the onset, the PAP's candidate was placed at a disadvantage as he was not able to differentiate himself from his party. The attempt to portray him as a "heartlander" originally from Punggol and as a representative of the struggles of ordinary families just could not compete with

the reality of Lee's stronger "heartlander" label.

In a constituency of young families, she was the younger candidate at 34 instead of 40. Voters in Punggol backed for the candidate they could relate to and the candidate who best exemplified the issues prominent in the campaign. Singaporeans - like voters across the region - are more attuned to having representatives that capture diversity and their experience.

The voters showed they want leaders in Parliament that identify and genuinely understand their concerns, rather than mirror the power holders. This is a fundamental challenge of dominant parties that engage in cloning when choosing their candidates. They forget that in order to keep their party relevant, the operative principle should be about embracing diversity and difference.

## Reform: Beyond populist tinkering

The election was also a referendum on the efforts of the PAP to engage in reform. Over the last two years, the PAP has introduced a series of initiatives on housing, healthcare and immigration, to name just a few.

These initiatives share some traits - they build on existing policies (so the fundamental of the policy is kept in place) and primarily assume that voters are motivated by money. At the same time, the PAP has launched a 'Singaporean Conversation', speaking to groups around the country in a well-meaning but orchestrated listening exercise for feedback.

These programmes underscored the confidence that the PAP had going to polls in Punggol as they have genuinely attempted reforms. Voters responding by sending a signal that these reforms are inadequate, highlighting that the PAP has much further to go in order to win back support.

The reasons that PAP's efforts are not gaining ground have to do in part with their assumptions and approach. Are voters motivated by money? Do materialist goals fundamentally motivate Singaporeans? The answer is that increasingly financial incentives are having less of an impact. Showering 'incentives' only increases the amounts and demands, and for some voters their concerns are not material, for example trust, rights, morality and representation.



As South-East Asian countries develop, fewer voters are driven solely by bread-and-butter concerns. Surveys of the Singaporean electorate showcase that a third of voters are more concerned with freedom and civil liberties than economic issues. Even more are concerned with inequalities and social justice, reinforcing a repudiation of elitism and elite candidates.

Populism initiatives tied to money are inherently limited in today's changing electorates and the more they are practiced, the less their effect. We see in Malaysia that cash handouts only lead to further demands and have a limited boost on popular support. Voters are not dumb - they fully understand that they are being bought and many know that their worth is much more than a paltry sum.

Implementation is as important as the measures themselves. While the PAP still has its machinery solidly

on the ground, fewer of those involved in grassroots work are chosen to represent the party. Decisions in policies and candidate selection are made centrally, without meaningful inputs from the ground. It is no wonder that the populist campaigning is not working.

For those in power, it is a difficult transition from a pattern of control to one with uncertainty, from superiority to greater equality, from distance to empathy and from knowledge to understanding.

It is further compounded by a resistance to real policy reform. For all of the measures that the PAP have introduced - and there are considerable - the policies themselves are still tied to the same fundamentals.

Immigration policy reforms have involved numbers, not whether the practice of relying on foreign labour is correct. The practice of late is that if foreign workers misbehave, then kick them out, as happened with the bus drivers who went on strike.

On housing, the regime still relies on close ties with property development and all the tinkering has yet to cool the market and bring affordable options to the electorate. Many in Punggol live far out because this is the only area they could afford, and even here prices are exorbitant.

The reality is that younger Singaporeans do not feel that they can have the same opportunities as their parents and the inequalities in their everyday reality are blatantly obvious. Indeed, the overwhelming majority in Singapore do not feel that they are fairly benefitting from the country's success.

The PAP has yet to accept that some of the policy frameworks in place may need to be re-hauled. A reform is not replacing one bill with another that does the same thing, or changing a threshold level on a policy that is still basically in place. The PAP technocrats are focused on tweaking the system that they think is working and not following the forefathers of early generations that recognised that new systems have to be created and introduced for today's new reality.

The resistance to change is deeply embedded in the system that efforts of reform are watered down, on in some cases even just for show.

### **A new reality with a new Lee**

Lee Li Lian's victory does not change the balance of power in Singapore. The opposition has seven elected seats in Parliament out of 87, a mere 8%. It does however bring in a new voice into Parliament, one who got there not by her political pedigree.

The campaign dynamics, macro trends and underlying factors are illustrative. Three days before the election, I believed that the Workers' Party could win this by-election, although I thought it would be close. The tide turned in the campaign, at rallies and in coffeeshop conversations.



The PAP came off as too distant from the electorate, and voters opted for a new Lee. Voters spoke up in their assessment of representation, reforms and the gap between the reform and their realities. The shifts on the ground however have been real for some time as voters demand for change.

These forces are gaining regionally, including in Malaysia. The questions of representation, reform and reality are as salient as they are across the Causeway, perhaps even more so

given the intensive politicking of the last few years and the level of competitiveness.

The parallels between the PAP and Umno are there, but unlike the PAP, the initiatives in reform are much less substantive in Malaysia and the fundamental problems of corruption and perceived abuses of power have sadly become even more accentuated with time.

Pakatan Rakyat has gained ground politically because it is seen to be more inclusive, more willing to offer change and more attuned to conditions on the ground, even though questions remain about how it will govern as a unit and its priorities in office.

The main lesson from Punggol East is that incumbents in dominant party systems not willing to substantively transform themselves is no longer an advantage. It is in fact a liability.