

PAP's Pandemic Backfire: The Covid-19 Factor in Singapore's 2020 Polls

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When Singapore held its 13th general election on 10 July, 2020, the People's Action Party (PAP) returned to power by securing 83 of the 93 seats. While a convincing majority with 61.2% of the popular vote, the result was one of the worst performances for the party in its history. The popular vote dropped by 8.7% from 69.9% in 2015 and the share of seats dropped below 90% for the first time since 1968. The election was deemed a 'pandemic election', one in which, I argue, ultimately worked against the PAP rather than in a 'flight to safety' presumed in their favour.¹

Covid-19 loomed large over the GE2020 polls. Not only was this the first pandemic election that had been called in Southeast Asia, Covid-19 shaped the timing of the polls, the campaign and, ultimately, the results. Below, I show that Covid-19 did not provide the 'crisis' boost in support that the PAP had expected. In fact, Covid-19 exposed many of the weaknesses of PAP governance, highlighted many of the challenges of the PAP's Singapore developmental model and ultimately brought to the fore sharp differences within Singaporean society regarding how the PAP governs. In fact, Covid-19 acted as a catalyst to bring inequality, displacement and demands for empowerment centre stage and ironically, rather than strengthen the mandate of the PAP, calling for an election amidst the pandemic backfired against them. Undoubtedly, GE2020 has transformed the relationship between the PAP and Singaporean citizens, making the challenges ahead not just about managing the pandemic and the public's expectations of the pandemic response but also the managers themselves.

To assess how Covid-19 affected the election, I rely on two different sources. The first is material published about Covid-19 in Singapore, including material on social media such as Twitter. The second source is drawn from focus group interviews conducted virtually in July after the election.² Through snowball sampling of 30 voters, split evenly into three groups between those who (1) supported the PAP in the last two elections; (2) supported opposition parties in the last two elections; and (3) changed their vote to or from the PAP in GE2020. Voters were asked about the factors that contributed to their voting, with special attention to how Covid-19 influenced their political participation. While not a large nor a

¹ Eugene KB. Tan 'Singapore's Covid-19 general election: political breakthrough amid a generational crisis?' (2020) 109(5) *The Round Table* 622-623.

² Focus group interviews were conducted from July 15 to July 30 over video and phone calls. The sample included 15 women and men from all the major ethnic communities in Singapore and the major age brackets, ranging from those in their 20s through the above-60s. The sample began by interviewing one person among each of the three groups: PAP supporters, opposition supporters and switch voters. Individuals were asked to recommend another person from within or outside of their group. These confidential discussions ranged from 15 minutes to an hour, in an open-ended format, with conversation concentrating on the campaign, Covid-19 and the factors influencing their vote and party choice in GE2020.

representative sample, these interviews provide insights into voting behaviour. What emerged from the interviews, developed below, is that Covid-19 did affect voting but by primarily reinforcing preexisting political outlooks and loyalties. For voters who moved away from the PAP, Covid-19 was a catalyst to bring some of these concerns about governance to the forefront. The GE2020 crisis polls thus offers insights into how political engagement in Singapore is changing, and not changing.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: COVID-19 IN SINGAPORE

To understand how Covid-19 played a role in GE2020 one has to appreciate that, from the onset, Covid-19 was politicized in Singapore. The pandemic touched a chord, reminding Singaporeans and the PAP of the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic and so provoking a strong proactive reaction on the PAP's part right from the start. On the one hand, Covid-19 was a relived trauma involving an economic downturn and the vulnerability of the Singapore public to health-related threats. At the same time, the virus allowed the PAP to tap into its state capacity, harness fear and uncertainty and showcase its governance and resources to its advantage. Covid-19 provided—it seemed—an ideal context for 'flight to safety' public responses.

On 23 January, 2020, Singapore was the second country outside of China to report a case of Covid-19. In the initial wave of the virus, the majority of reported cases were tied to individuals living in Wuhan, China. Despite this, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong received international praise for his public communication to reassure and engage the public³ and, through March, Singapore became lauded as a global example of prudent and sound intervention in its public health response toward Covid-19. The PAP leadership acknowledged the global and holistic implications of the virus on society, the economy and global relations. Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan was feted for his analytical remarks, tying Covid-19 to the economy, governance, public health care systems and social capital.⁴

Even as local clusters emerged and anxiety within Singapore rose, the PAP's science-based and common-sense public health interventions gained international recognition. Balakrishnan's widely circulated remarks to CNBC on 11 March set the bar high for Singapore, as he noted:

You know the Singapore government. We take things very very seriously. We prepare for the worst and we get all our measures lined up, coordinated and we communicate with our people and people understand what we are doing. ... In fact, this is an acid test of every single country's quality of health care, standard of governance, and social capital. And if any one of these tripod is weak, it will be exposed and exposed quite unmercifully by this epidemic.⁵

³ PM Lee Hsien Loong on the Covid Situation in Singapore, 8 Feb 2020. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-on-the-Novel-Coronavirus-nCoV-Situation-in-Singapore-on-8-February-2020> (accessed 1 Dec 2020)

⁴ CNBC Interview with Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, 11 Mar 2020 <https://hi.in.facebook.com/Vivian.Balakrishnan.Sg/videos/655285165229616/> (accessed 1 Dec 2020)

⁵ Ibid.

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

It was around mid-March that concerns about the PAP's management began to be openly raised within Singapore itself. The leak of the discussion involving fourth generation (4G) leader Chan Chun Sing concerning face masks served as an initial catalyst to question the PAP.⁶ This was the first major crack in the Government's positive public response as some in the public began to ask about the allocation of supplies and whether face masks were needed. The 'government knows best' PAP brand took a dent. Unlike the handling of SARS, the Government was to face a more sceptical and demanding public 17 years later. Many of the Government's decisions were questioned, such as not closing schools, forcing government ministers to explain their rationale.⁷ What was to become clear was that, as Covid-19 evolved, more Singaporeans would come to challenge the Government's responses more openly than had been the practice in the past.

As March progressed, the case numbers began to rise, as shown in Chart 1.⁸ Singapore was initially careful to distinguish between local and foreign cases and, as the pandemic evolved, would further compartmentalize non-Singaporeans who became infected in Singapore from Singaporeans.⁹ The careful classification of Covid-19 cases served to minimize the reported numbers, reduce public anxiety and at the same time reduce potential criticism towards the Government for the rising numbers. At the same time, the Government tapped into its strong government capacity and robust healthcare infrastructure. The latter strengths gained the most attention of scholars examining Singapore's initial Covid-19 response.¹⁰

In March, countries around the world began deepening their lockdowns, with neighbouring Malaysia introducing a mandatory lockdown in mid-March and European countries facing both high deaths and strict movement measures. Singapore's Government worked to keep the economy open as long as possible. This would change in early April. The total tally of cases reached over 1,000 when Prime Minister Lee introduced the 'circuit breaker', requiring all Singaporeans to stay home. This was

⁶ Kayla Wong, Sulaiman Daud, and Belmont Lay 'Full transcript of 25-minute leaked audio recording of Chan Chun Sing dialogue with SCCCI' *Mothership* 20 Feb 2020. <https://mothership.sg/2020/02/chan-chun-sing-leaked-transcript/> (accessed 21 Feb 2020).

⁷ Kayla Wong, 'Education Minister Ong Ye Kung: Correct to Keep Singapore Schools Open,' *Mothership*, April 7, 2020, <https://mothership.sg/2020/04/covid-19-ong-ye-kung-schools-open/>

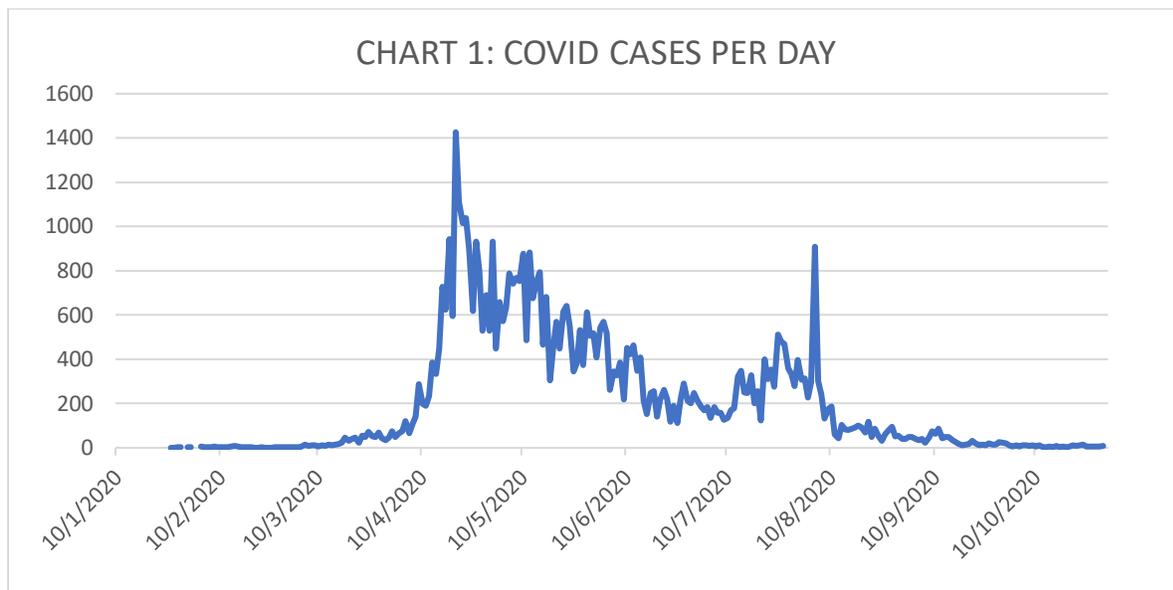
⁸ This graph is drawn from data published daily by the Government of Singapore on the cases of Covid-19. See: <https://www.gov.sg/features/covid-19> (accessed 1 Nov 2020)

⁹ Singapore would change its categories of Covid-19 cases. By the end of year, the government would list 'In the community' (Singaporean/Permanent Resident/Work Pass Holder); 'Imported'; and 'Residing in dormitories' (Work Permit holders residing in foreign worker dormitories) and differentiate between those with or without symptoms.

¹⁰ JJ Woo, 'Policy capacity and Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic' (2020) 39(3) *Policy and Society* 345-362; Danny Quah, 'Singapore's Policy Response to COVID-19' in R Baldwin, R and B Weder di Mauro, (eds) *Mitigating the COVID Economic Crisis: Act Fast and Do Whatever It Takes* (London: CEPR, 2020) 103-111; Damian Wnukowski, 'Singapore's Reaction to COVID-19: Lessons Learnt for EU Countries.' (2020) 72(1502) *Polish Institute of International Affairs Bulletin (PISM)*, 8 Apr 2020.

essentially a lockdown, but one labeled with a Singapore brand. Many citizens had been asking for weeks why the lockdown had not been introduced earlier; arguably, the PAP had resisted this measure as it would be seen as a sign of failure.¹¹

On 5 April, after a spike of 120 cases, the Government sealed off two dormitories housing over 20,000 foreign workers. This was the straw that broke the lockdown wall. Singapore's circuit breaker began on 7 April and would last eight weeks through 1 June. There was a gradual easing of restrictions, but essentially Singaporeans were required to stay home to help 'flatten the curve'. The Government implemented the measure emphatically, relying on both voluntary and enforced compliance through administering warning notices and fines to assure the regulations were followed.¹²



Source: Government of Singapore.

Throughout this period, however, elections were in the background, as a flattening of the curve would provide the PAP an opportunity to hold polls. Preparations had been underway for general elections since 2019, with the crisis of Covid-19 providing another potential pivotal moment for the PAP to win a strong mandate. At the same time, Covid-19 militated against holding elections earlier, given its uncertainty and health risks. A flatter curve would give the PAP an electoral opportunity.

¹¹ Walid Jumblatt Abdullah and Soojin Kim. 'Singapore's Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak: A Critical Assessment' (2020) 50(6-7) *The American Review of Public Administration* 770-776

¹² 'Authorities issued 10,000 advisories, 3100 warnings and 40 fines to members of the public for social distancing violations in just three days' after the circuit breaker was announced. Cited in Catherine Mei Ling Wong, and Olivia Jensen. 'The paradox of trust: perceived risk and public compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore' (2020) *Journal of Risk Research* 7.

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

Beyond managing the health dimensions of Covid, the PAP responded to the socio-economic effects of the virus with the power of the purse, announcing a February election budget and subsequent stimulus and relief spending Covid-19 budgets. In GE2015, clientelist government spending was an essential tool used to shore up political support, following a long tradition of use of the budget and other financial incentives before polls.¹³ The Pioneer Package for seniors was seen to be especially effective in the previous election. In the 2019 budget, the PAP Government continued this trajectory with the Merdeka Generation Package geared for those born in the 1950s with modest offsets of medical expenses.¹⁴ The 2020 Covid budgets—actually four different budget allocations under the rubric of unity, solidarity, resilience and fortitude—broke a record in public spending from the national reserves. By the fourth pre-election announcement, the Fortitude Budget, a total of S\$93 billion was allocated, over 15% of GDP.¹⁵ Electoral, health pandemic and economic realities of a contraction combined to increase public spending in an unprecedented manner.

An examination of the Covid-19 budget allocations elicits three important observations. First, most of the allocations followed the ideological assumptions of past spending, focused on the economy with business as the main recipients. In laying out the Fortitude budget one month before the election campaign in June, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said:

We have put our people at the centre of our Budgets. Our measures on protecting livelihoods centre on helping people to stay employed, and businesses to stay viable (...) More than S\$72 billion, or close to 80 per cent of the S\$93 billion for COVID-19 support measures, is committed to helping workers stay in their jobs, supporting businesses and their employees, which in turn support social resilience.¹⁶

A closer look at the initiatives, detailed in Table 1, shows a continued reliance on funding workers through businesses and giving subsidies to businesses, such as SG Skills United or the Jobs Support Scheme. Second, the focus on “need-based” programmes concentrated on narrow criteria for inclusion. While many of the Covid-19 initiatives were open to “everyone” and the “middle class”, the frame of focusing on the “hard core” poor for assistance persisted in many of the social programmes, such as the Workfare Income Supplement.¹⁷ Third, many of these allocations were targeted politically, towards

¹³ For a discussion of clientelism in earlier elections, see: Meredith L Weiss *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Bridget Welsh ‘Clientelism and Control: PAP’s Fight for Safety in GE2015’ (2016) 105(2) *The Round Table* 119–128.

¹⁴ For more information on this package, see: <https://www.gov.sg/features/merdeka-generation>

¹⁵ Government of Singapore, Singapore Budget 2020, https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/docs/default-source/budget_2020/download/pdf/fy2020_fortitude_budget_summary.pdf The budget measures are detailed on the www.singaporebudget.gov.sg.

¹⁶ Chew Hui Min, ‘Parliament passes Fortitude Budget, 4th package of COVID-19 relief measures this year,’ *Channel News Asia*, 5 Jun 2020 <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/fortitude-budget-covid-19-parliament-passes-heng-swee-keat-12808172>

¹⁷ See Nathan Peng. ‘Inequality and the Social Compact in Singapore’ (2019) 36(3) *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies* 355–379.

sectors that were deemed politically important for the 2020 poll. This followed the pattern in earlier election budgets. The groups especially targeted were seniors, youth and young families through programmes such as the Seniors Go Digital Program, Education Subsidies and Baby Bonus, respectively.¹⁸ There were also initiatives to please all, such as Goods and Services Tax (GST) or tax rebates, no increase in GST and vouchers to support local tourism businesses. The budget spending itself was couched as “revolutionary”, an indicator of deep commitment to the electorate as well as an indicator of a “caring and changing” PAP. The budget speeches openly appealed to nationalist rhetoric for a “stronger Singapore” and reaffirmed PAP’s legitimacy as the “protector” of the people. At the same time, the people were not to be empowered in their own right, with spending allocated indirectly and in only conditions of ‘special dire circumstances. While the PAP moved markedly away from the rigidity it previously had in social spending levels, many of the traditional frames and forms of engaging the electorate top-down remained in place.

¹⁸ See Government of Singapore descriptions of the budget: https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/docs/default-source/budget_2020/download/pdf/fy2020_fortitube_youngfamilies.pdf and https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/docs/default-source/budget_2020/download/pdf/households-disbursement.pdf

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

Table 1 Overview of Key People-Oriented Programmes in Singapore's Covid-19 Budgets¹⁹

Workers	SG United Skills SkillsFuture Credit Top-Up SEP Income Relief Scheme (SIRS) COVID-19 Support Grant (CSG) Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) Temporary Relief Fund (TRF) April	Households	GST Voucher Scheme Care & Support Package Solidarity Payment Solidarity Utilities Credit Healthcare subsidies
		In Need	ComCare MediFund Public Rental Scheme
Lower-income Workers	Workfare Income Supplement Progressive Wage Model	Young Families	Baby Bonus MediSave Grant for Newborns Housing grants and subsidies Kindergarten and childcare subsidies
Seniors	Silver Support Housing monetisation schemes Pioneer Generation Package Merdeka Generation Package 5-Year MediSave Top-up Seniors Go Digital movement Matched Retirement Savings Scheme Defer Increase in CPF contribution rates		Tertiary Students

¹⁹ Government of Singapore, Ministry of Finance, Budget Summary 2020. See: https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2020/budget-measures/budget-summary

Another important dimension of the Covid-19 budget spending was its illustration of broader patterns of the PAP's governance in the pandemic. The PAP has long been lauded for its preparedness, a factor repeatedly emphasized as underscoring its success in government and in its initial engagement with Covid-19. The more 'ad hoc' government interventions responding to changes in the pandemic reflected a move away from proactive to reactive governance; Singapore moved from being a leader, to following others, on face mask use and lockdowns, for example. On the financial side, the new budgets showcased responsiveness but also showed an underestimation of the impact of the pandemic itself, despite being on the global forefront in drawing attention to the long-term effects of Covid-19. The PAP was not alone in this, as governments across the world lacked foresight. Based on the focus group interviews, because the PAP had initially set itself up to the general public as being well prepared for the challenges of the pandemic, some voters viewed the Government's gradual shift to the backfoot as having moved the PAP off its governance pedestal as the pandemic progressed. For non-PAP supporters the measures showed weakness, not strength. For PAP supporters, however, the reactivity was a sign of strength, not weakness; the PAP was seen as flexible and adaptive. The findings suggested that the PAP Government's Covid-19 response was seen through a pre-existing political lens even before the GE2020.

Internationally, the shift in perceptions of the PAP's handling of the pandemic would shift with the April spike in Covid cases of foreign workers. Singapore employs 300,000 foreign workers, largely from Bangladesh, to work in the "dirty jobs" of construction and building services.²⁰ The wide publicity around the cases of foreign workers opened up a period of intensive defensive exchanges about the treatment of foreign workers in Singapore, the factors that contributed to the spread of the virus among these communities (crowded facilities) and criticism of the Government for failing to listen to the warnings of civil society.²¹ The discussion ranged from human rights violations and defences of Government practices to broader discussions about immigration, a long-term highly emotive issue in national politics. Once again 4G PAP leaders were put in the hot seat. Josephine Teo of the Ministry of Manpower was asked to explain the facilities foreign workers were living in and the Government's regulations of this sector. She was even asked to tender an apology in Parliament for how the situation had been handled.²² Her responses provoked strong reactions, not least because they reinforced the perception that foreign workers were secondary to the interests of business, and deemed 'not part of the community'. Chair of the Covid-19 task force Lawrence Wong was also questioned for referring to

²⁰ Junjia Ye, *Class Inequality in the Global City: Migrants, Workers and Cosmopolitanism in Singapore* (Springer, 2016).

²¹ See, for example, Megan K. Stack, 'A Sudden Coronavirus Surge Brought out Singapore's Dark Side,' *New York Times*, May 20, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/magazine/singapore-coronavirus.html> Shona Loong, 'The missing link in Singapore's Covid-19 Strategy,' *The Diplomat*, 14 Apr 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-missing-link-in-singapores-covid-19-strategy/?fbclid=IwAR0IPpsPOwYMH-PfwQbKD5hBTAeyJVduAN1yX0IkyL5D1D3gDmxw4e9AcOg>; Nile Bowie, 'Cracks Show in Singapore's Model Covid-19 Response' *Asia Times*, 7 Apr 2020 <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/cracks-show-in-singapores-model-covid-19-response/>

²² Minister of Manpower Josephine Teo response in parliament to request for apology, 4 May 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miWrDvCcsao>

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

foreign worker cases as “two separate infections”.²³ The PAP’s defensive responses and the seriousness of the health risks foreign workers were facing transformed Singapore’s image—it was no longer ‘special’ but ‘normal’, facing the realities of pandemic policy mistakes and ignoring vulnerable communities like everyone else. Case numbers shot up as the virus spread through the dormitories, reaching a total of over 35,000 by June.

While foreign media outlets prominently covered the story, the handling of foreign workers provoked strong reactions among Singaporeans. Academic Donald Low, for example, explicitly called out the PAP for failing to heed the warnings of civil society.²⁴ The political effects of the Covid-19 foreign worker rising cases reverberated, bringing long-standing contentious political narratives to the fore. Low’s criticism—vehemently echoed by members of civil society and other scholars²⁵—brought attention to the PAP’s engagement with civil society, drawing attention to the more repressive responses against public assembly and activism in recent years.²⁶ Concerns were expressed about the dehumanization of foreign workers in Singapore, provoking public crowd funding initiatives for their assistance. The stark living conditions of foreign workers returned attention to debates about inequality and, less explicitly but no less emotively, racial prejudice, given the disproportionate effect of Covid-19 on foreign workers. Taking centre stage were questions about Singapore’s model of growth, its dependence on foreign workers—who now posed a Covid-19 risk to Singaporeans and were now themselves at greater risk for working in Singapore. Deep resentments about high immigration returned to prominence, leading to the reassertion that foreign workers were separate and not part of the community.²⁷

As the GE2020 campaign approached, Singapore had fallen from its global superstar status in addressing Covid-19. The opportunity the pandemic had provided to showcase the PAP’s strengths morphed into an opportunity for critics of the PAP to point to the weaknesses of PAP governance. In June, the day before GE nominations, Vivian Balakrishnan returned to CNBC for a long interview. The tone was noticeably different than the interview held three months earlier, as the minister spoke of the “New Normal” and

²³ Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong on COVID-19, 9 Apr 2020, www.sgpc.gov.sg/sgpcmedia/media_releases/mnd/speech/S-20200409-1/attachment/Remarks%20by%20Minister%20Lawrence%20Wong%20at%209%20Apr%20Press%20Conference%20on%20COVID-19%20final.pdf

²⁴ Donald Low, ‘How Singapore can draw the right lessons from the Coronavirus crisis’ *South China Morning Post*, 16 Apr 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3080095/how-singapore-can-draw-right-lessons-coronavirus-crisis>

²⁵ Sulaiman Daud. ‘The way Singapore treats its foreign workers is not First World but Third World’: Tommy Koh on Covid-19 clusters in dormitories’ *Mothership*, 6 Apr 2020, <https://mothership.sg/2020/04/tommy-koh-foreign-workers-singapore-third-world/>

²⁶ See Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, ‘“New normal” no more: democratic backsliding in Singapore after 2015’ (2020) 27(7) *Democratization* 1123–1141; and Netina Tan, ‘Digital learning and extending electoral authoritarianism in Singapore,’ (2020) 27(6) *Democratization* 1073–1091.

²⁷ Mark R. Frost, ‘An unsettled majority: immigration and the racial ‘balance’ in multicultural Singapore’ (2020) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1-23.

the need for “ring-fencing” and greater “vigilance”.²⁸ He acknowledged that the election ahead would be a “tough fight” as both the electoral opportunity Covid-19 had provided and the pandemic itself had become more risky.

MITIGATING PAP RISK: A CAMPAIGN IN COVID-19

The PAP was faced with a series of dilemmas as the election approached. The pandemic had escalated risks, including political risk. At the same time, the Government wanted to use the window of declining cases as an opportunity to hold the election. This involved convincing the electorate that had been primed to be especially concerned about the risks of Covid-19 that it was safe to hold the election, all the while winning voter support.

In May, the PAP had introduced a Bill to regulate a Covid-19 campaign, then a sure sign that election preparations were well underway. The Parliamentary Elections (COVID-19 Special Arrangements) Act 2020 expanded the number of polling stations, introduced preventative safety measures standard operating procedures (SOPs) for voting and laid out protocols for those infected with or quarantined for suspected Covid-19.²⁹ Voters were given windows to vote, with elderly voters over 65 years given priority.

In line with international protocols for ‘safe’ Covid-19 elections, the rules were also seen to bolster the PAP’s protector role, another chance to show its ability to keep the electorate safe.³⁰ The rules, especially the mandatory wearing of face masks, did make a difference. Unlike other countries in Asia that held elections subsequently, such as the September 2020 Sabah state election in Malaysia or Myanmar’s November election, Singapore did not experience a post-election spike in Covid-19 cases (as shown in Graph 1). While the media did highlight the delays and long queues tied to the new procedures, the Elections Department did carry out the procedures to relative success, despite the obvious strain these measures placed on the system.³¹ Unprecedentedly, the Elections Department did extend voting times due to the long lines. It not clear whether the delays affected voting support. Looking at reports where lines were longest, such as in Bukit Merah in Tanjong Pagar GRC where the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) gained 14.6% in the popular vote compared with GE2015, the results are only slightly above the national swing. This was reinforced by the focus group interviews; those that

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<https://www.facebook.com/Vivian.Balakrishnan.Sg/videos/vb.30332546206/707179710072609/?type=2&theater>

29 Government of Singapore, Statute 526, *Parliamentary Elections (COVID-19 Special Arrangements) Act*, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PECOVID19SAA2020-S536-2020>

30 International Foundation for *Electoral Systems, Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken During Covid-19*, 21 Oct, 2020, https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections_held_and_mitigating_measures_taken_during_covid-19.pdf

31 ‘GE2020 ELD apologises for polling station queues, says gloves requirement contributed to long wait times,’ *Channel News Asia*, 10 Jul 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/ge2020-eld-long-queues-voting-apologise-disposable-gloves-12920780>

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

would have supported or opposed the PAP would likely have decided before polling day. This was also the case for those who reported switching their vote from GE2015.

Most important for the election were the new campaign rules, including a ban on campaign rallies and social distancing measures for voters. The effect was to move the election campaign online and to national television (often streamed online). Time was given to all candidates to make statements on television. Face-to-face engagements were limited although walkabouts were allowed. This made for a less open campaign, reinforcing the role of social media and pre-existing patterns of support. Not surprisingly, the new regulations were seen to favour the PAP and limit the opposition's ability to win support through traditional personal, interactive campaigning. Attention focused on how the measures affected campaign momentum during campaign rallies.³² The lack of an opportunity to connect with the electorate through rallies was seen to favour the PAP with its strong grassroots and dominance in mainstream and social media. The loss of 8.7% support for the PAP, however, suggests that Covid-19 campaigning did not necessarily work as much in PAP's favour as initially projected. While it is impossible to fully access the counterfactual (i.e., a non-pandemic campaign), campaigning during Covid-19 changed the nature of the contest.

First of all, Covid-19 was everywhere in the campaign. The PAP's manifesto of 'Our Lives, Our Jobs, Our Future' centered on the public health and economic dimensions of the virus. Arguably, Covid-19 was the core of the PAP's campaign. The 'strong Singapore' message tied into nationalist, unity rhetoric that had characterized the Government's communication since the pandemic began. In contrast, opposition parties did not focus on Covid-19 directly, referring to health and job issues irrespective of the pandemic. Opposition parties intentionally moved the arguments beyond Covid, to potentially more attractive higher ground. They highlighted the socio-economic problems Covid-19 had exposed, notably job security, health insurance and wages. The WP, for example, only included one of its 10 points on health, focusing on insurance without mention of Covid-19.³³ The most popular Covid-related Tweet during the campaign featured WP candidate Nicole Seah: "If you elect more WP MPs to Parliament, we can make the voices of Singaporean workers who've been left behind during this pandemic louder."³⁴ The Progressive Singapore Party also presented its ideas as going beyond Covid—"As much as COVID-19 is a very important crisis that is affecting the country, the country should not stop and look at the problem on its own but look at what else needs to be done to address the structural problems affecting us," said Michael Chua, candidate for Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency (GRC).³⁵

³² Yvette Tan, 'Coronavirus in Singapore: Election campaigning without the handshakes' *BBC*, 5 Jul 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53216390>

³³ Rei Kurohi, 'Singapore GE2020: 10 Proposals from the Worker's Party Manifesto, *Straits Times*, 28 Jun 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-10-proposals-from-the-workers-party-manifesto>

³⁴ @wpsg, Twitter post, 4 Jul 2020, <https://twitter.com/wpsg/status/1279407591194529794?s=20>

³⁵ Matthew Mohan, 'GE2020 PSP articulates vision clearly, PM Lee should consider party's ideas, says candidate Michael Chua,' *Channel News Asia*, 7 Jul 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/ge2020-progress-singapore-party-manifesto-michael-chua-12909204>

In fact, PAP 4G leader Chan Chun Sing tried to get the opposition parties to play to the PAP's tune by exhorting them to refocus on Covid-19.³⁶ WP leader Pritam Singh responded that his party's manifesto showed how seriously they viewed the crisis.³⁷ Other parties followed suit and ratcheted up the criticism of the PAP's Covid-19 response.³⁸ The PAP wanted to maintain the public's focus on the pandemic as this was seen to be advantageous to them.

Given this focus and the PAP's intent to control the campaign narrative, it is not surprising that the PAP came into conflict with others who questioned how Covid had been handled by the Government. This second dimension—the contestation around Covid-19 was evident from the start, with opposition parties expressing concern over the wisdom and timing of calling an election during a pandemic. Among the most disgruntled was Reform Party leader Kenneth Jeyaretnam, who spent most of the campaign period in quarantine despite being a candidate. Pre-election debates and responses to issues of inequality and governance continued.³⁹ The most heated contestation involved the PAP's disagreement with Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) Chairman, Dr Paul Tambyah, a globally recognized infectious disease specialist who was contesting in Bukit Panjang. On 5 July, in the middle of the campaign, the Government issued a Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) notice to four media organizations regarding the comments made by Tambyah at a pre-election forum on the treatment of foreign workers regarding medical testing in Covid as well as comments about how decisions were made.⁴⁰ In compliance with the law, all the media outlets published corrections. The intent was clear, to damage Tambyah's credibility. He responded in seeing the POFMA demand as political: "They take an issue and then they paint the SDP as being distorted or propagating all kinds of untruths but there's no substance whatsoever."⁴¹ With Covid-19 so central to the PAP's campaign, it is no wonder that it so robustly challenged those who questioned their response to the pandemic.

³⁶ Danson Cheong, 'GE2020 Covid-19 should be the focus of all parties says Chun Sing at half times,' *Straits Times*, 4 Jul 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-covid-19-crisis-should-be-focus-of-all-parties-says-chun-sing-at-half-time>; @straitstimes, Twitter Post, 4 Jul <https://twitter.com/straitstimes/status/1279286298155479041?s=20>

³⁷ Audrey Tan, 'Singapore GE2020: WP Manifesto shows how serious party takes crisis,' *Straits Times*, 7 Jul 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge-wp-manifesto-shows-how-seriously-party-takes-covid-19-crisis-says-pritam-singh>

³⁸ Lim Yan Liang, 'Opposition Slams PAP leaders handling of Covid-19 pandemic,' *Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/opposition-slams-pap-leaders-handling-of-covid-19-pandemic>

³⁹ The most prominent of these was the discussion and response by the Embassy of Singapore in Japan to Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh's article 'Coronavirus and Inequality Threaten to Unsettle Singapore Election,' *South China Morning Post*, 1 Jul 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Coronavirus-and-inequality-threaten-to-unsettle-Singapore-election>

⁴⁰ POFMA Office instructed to issue correction directions to CNA, Online Citizen Asia, NUS and New Naratif over Paul Tambyah comments, *Channel News Asia*, 5 Jul 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/pofma-office-correction-order-tambyah-cna-nuss-toc-new-naratif-12903772>

⁴¹ Goh Chiew Tiong, 'GE2020: POFMA correction directions 'a complete distraction', says SDP's Tambyah' *Channel News Asia*, 6 Jul 2020, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/ge2020-sdp-paul-tambyah-pofma-distraction-covid-19-dormitories-12904928?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

Singapore's Covid-19 campaign provoked other reactions beyond the open contestation. An interesting study before election found that Singaporeans had high trust in the Government, but this trust led to taking health risks during the pandemic and resultant non-compliance of the protocols to address Covid-19—what has been called the “paradox of trust”.⁴² The study points out that Covid-19 involved political trust, which shaped risk assessments in the population. These factors were also undercurrents related to Covid in the campaign, although not quite in the same way. Singaporeans showed the highest levels of trust in government in Southeast Asia (after Vietnam), but the extent of trust in government generally, and the PAP in particular, had decreased.⁴³ The divide between those who saw the party positively and those who did not widened, as Singaporeans began to hold increasingly polarized views of government. These divisions were evident in how Singaporeans viewed the pandemic election.

Many of those who did not trust the PAP Government viewed the holding of a pandemic election with scepticism and cynicism, while those with higher trust viewed holding the election as sensible and adequately careful. Based on the focus group interviews carried out after the election, voters who viewed Covid-19 positively or negatively reflected pre-existing political orientations. What Covid-19 did, however, was to heighten political risk and stimulate a greater willingness to vote for the ‘other side’. Focus groups pointed to three predominant factors related to political risk in GE2020: (1) perceptions that the PAP would win, so a vote was unlikely to fundamentally shift the balance of power; (2) greater acceptance of a need for more checks and balances for the Government; (3) discontent with policies, especially involving the economy. Those who mentioned Covid-19 as their most serious concern did so primarily for its economic effects and how it illustrated their differences with how the PAP was governing, not the Covid-19 response per se.

What was it about Covid-19 in Singapore's polls that provoked some voters to move away from the PAP? There are three possible interpretations. The first is that the PAP's decline in support would still have occurred without Covid, that Covid-19 made little difference at all, except perhaps to offset a further erosion of support. A second explanation is that Covid-19 brought to the fore already divisive issues amongst Singaporeans, concerns about inequality, displacement, race relations and the lack of inclusive political engagement. Third, anxiety and fear did not evoke a ‘flight to safety’ response but instead provoked a lashing out response that punished the PAP. The focus groups found that all three (overlapping) explanations had merit, but the first and second explanations were more salient. Covid-19 had triggered and reinforced longstanding issues of concern.

Focus group interviewees also highlighted the poor treatment of foreign workers. For many, it illustrated the inequality in Singaporean society—how some groups are treated badly while others benefit. There were both sentiments of anger against inequality and empathy with workers. Interviewees often envisioned the treatment of workers in line with their own conditions. For example, a 30-year-old Indian Singaporean said, “This is how they treat me. I am lucky I have a passport or they would put me in the

⁴² Catherine Mei Ling Wong, and Olivia Jensen. ‘The paradox of trust: perceived risk and public compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore’ (2020) 23(7–8) *Journal of Risk Research* 1021-1030.

⁴³ Bridget Welsh, and Alex H Chang. ‘PAP Vulnerability and the Singapore Governance Model: Findings from the Asian Barometer Survey’ in Lily Zubaidah Rahim & Michael Barr (eds), *The Limits of Authoritarian Governance in Singapore's Developmental State* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 195–216.

dorms and force me to have a test.” Another interviewee, a 60-year-old Chinese Singaporean said, “They are exploited, just like me.” Some respondents explicitly spoke about the racial dimension of the foreign worker issue. The same Indian Singaporean said, “It is because of the colour of their skin. They are seen as less than human. This is how I am made to feel sometimes.” His remarks spoke to recent research highlighting more open concerns about racial prejudice in Singapore.⁴⁴ For others, attention was on the lack of checks and balances in how the PAP to make decisions, and its perceived refusal to listen to alternative views. “No more blank cheque, no more ignoring social organization. They (the PAP) need to change,” said a 23-year-old Chinese Singaporean. Covid-19 brought to the fore older issues, reactivating these underlying concerns among voters. The issues of inequality, treatment of ethnic minorities and call to reduce PAP power unexpectedly gained new life in Covid. This unfolded during an election campaign that was highly personal—one shaped by the individual’s choice of social media outlet and within preexisting social networks, in one’s home. During a trauma, old traumas reemerged—increasing the PAP’s political risk.

At the same time, the interviewees also pointed to positive messages—a search for new ideals and a better society with better governance. The same 23-year-old Chinese Singaporean reflected, “We can be better. We need to be a better place, as we are better than what is happening.” Another interviewee, a new citizen of Indian origin and staunch PAP supporter, highlighted that Covid-19 was a “test for the 4G that they (the PAP) would pass with flying colors”. He went on to say, “Singapore will have to change. This pandemic will make it change. It will make the PAP and Singapore stronger.” Another new citizen originally from the Philippines, a 47-year-old woman, put her reflections differently, “We will get more from this crisis. We all will have to be kinder, the government included.”

The final theme that focus groups revealed was that Covid-19 had encouraged stronger responses for self-empowerment, more care of oneself and each other as opposed to allowing the government to intervene and mediate. As Covid-19 ‘normalized’ Singapore’s response to crisis, bringing to the fore areas where there were gaps in governance, more Singaporeans spoke of the need to care for themselves. While there was a consistent call for a large leading role to be played by the government, others felt the need for more independent citizen roles. In addition to the findings of Wong and Jensen on greater non-compliance, Covid-19 also encouraged more citizen decision-making. One interviewee, a 40-year-old Malay Singaporean said, “We have to take care of ourselves, because Covid has shown us we are the only ones that matter and care for ourselves.” Amongst opposition party supporters, the Covid-19 pandemic was viewed as a period that had created conditions that enhanced Singaporeans’ voices, as criticism of the PAP was seen as contributing to constructive solutions to the country’s challenges.

SINGAPORE’S COVID ELECTION IN PERSPECTIVE

In mitigating risk, the PAP opened itself up to greater political risk. By all prominent international accounts, Singapore was lauded for carrying out a safe election during Covid-19, joining South Korea in ensuring that infection rates did not increase. This success stood in stark contrast to the Southeast Asian

⁴⁴ Selvaraj Velayutham, ‘Races without racism?: Everyday race relations in Singapore’ (2017) 24(4) *Identities* 455-473; and Nur Amali Aminnuddin, ‘Discriminatory attitudes toward vulnerable groups in Singapore: Prevalence, predictors, and pattern’ (2019) 14(2) *The Journal of Behavioral Science* 15–30.

Source: *Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee. Launch date: 27 March 2021.

elections that followed in Sabah, Malaysia and Myanmar, where cases and deaths rose from the conduct of the campaign and polling. Yet, the PAP's electoral performance was comparatively lower than other regional countries holding legislative elections. Five countries in Asia held competitive legislative elections during the pandemic (through November 2020), with Sri Lanka's Mahinda Rajapaksa incumbent government performing the best. In all five elections, incumbents were re-elected. Singapore was the only country that recorded a significant decline in support for its incumbent government. The PAP did not replicate the strong electoral gains of fellow strong early Covid-19 performer South Korea.

Table 2: Covid Elections in Asia

Country	Month Election was Held	Winner	Change in Popular Vote
South Korea	April	Incumbent	Increase by 7.9%
Mongolia	June	Incumbent	Decrease by 0.8%
Singapore	July	Incumbent	Decreased by 8.7%
Sri Lanka	August	Incumbent	Increase by 16.6%
Myanmar	November	Incumbent	Increase in Seats 45

What accounts for Singapore bucking the electoral trend? While acknowledging the unique features of all these elections, one key difference was that Covid-19 was given a higher priority in Singapore compared to other issues, with perhaps the exception of South Korea. In Mongolia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, personality and the economy took on greater prominence in those campaigns than health issues. The PAP aimed to play the Covid-19 card for greater political security, a tactic well understood by its electorate. This backfired in ways outlined above, turning opportunities to build the PAP's standing into opportunities for criticism and opening the PAP to greater political scrutiny and risk.

The PAP underestimated the effect of the pandemic in much the same ways it did the pandemic itself. As the PAP's Covid-19 policies moved from proactive to reactive under intensive public scrutiny, and with a party leadership that was slow to respond to its mistakes and resistant to adaptation in areas of foreign workers, Covid-19 reinforced the opposition voices and even empowered them. The end result was a sizeable decline in public support. Importantly, however, the PAP still retained a supermajority in Parliament. PAP's core supporters stayed steadfastly loyal. When Singaporeans danced in the street after the results were released on polling night, one interview remarked he "could not relate" as "this wasn't my Singapore".

⁴⁵ Popular vote not yet available at the time of writing, but it is expected to increase given electoral gains.

These political shifts—opposition gains, loss of public support, greater discussion of inequality, empowerment among citizens and sharply different outlooks—make for an exceptionally memorable poll. Yet, the main changes associated with Covid-19 are broader and evolving. That the PAP felt it had to use the crisis card to maintain its level of support but failed to do so points to greater emerging challenges for the party. It is losing support and has yet to find a way to regain the overwhelming majority levels it had in the past.⁴⁶ Even more important, it has yet to realize that a return to past levels is not possible. The crisis card replay did not work as effectively. Shifts need to happen, including a ratcheting down of political expectations. The PAP has set itself levels of performance that do not gel with the political realities of a modern contemporary and more pluralistic Singapore.

Equally challenging is that the levers the PAP used in the past to woo support in elections—cash incentives, targeting voters, promoting nationalism and unity, focusing on the quality and merit of its leadership, stoking fear of reprisals, attacks on critics and discouraging individual empowerment—no longer have the same impact they had in the past. Covid-19 created conditions where the PAP Government had to adopt new practices, such as increased budgetary spending, while continuing to hold onto the practices of the past, notably a protector, ‘government-knows-best’ approach and a dependence on migrant labor in its enduring commitment to the same model of economic growth. In Singapore’s more complex and politically divided and politically active society, traditional PAP approaches do not connect as well, especially amongst an electorate that includes a growing pool of voters who are increasingly distancing themselves from the PAP. The PAP now faces a dilemma: To continue to try to hold the middle ground through less effective policy interventions or reform. GE2020 is further proof that attempts to marginalize dissent after GE2015 backfired as well.

As Covid-19 continues, its impact will be especially devastating for the economy and it will continue to expose social and political vulnerabilities. Singapore will face problems with its model of growth, as one that is dependent on globalization and access to foreign markets and labor. It will be hard hit by the reality of inequality within the city-state, with limited social safety nets amidst high costs of living. Despite its backfire in GE2020, the Covid factor will continue to light a fire under the PAP for greater reform. The pressures for change, however, are likely to be resisted, as they were in GE2020, reinforcing and widening sharp differences about the PAP’s governance ahead.

⁴⁶ See Steven Oliver & Kai Ostwald, ‘Explaining elections in Singapore: Dominant party resilience and valence politics’ (2018) 18(2) *Journal of East Asian Studies* 129–156; and Steven Oliver, and Kai Ostwald. ‘Singapore’s Pandemic Election: Opposition Parties and Valence Politics in GE2020’ (2020) 93(4) *Pacific Affairs* 759-780.