

# Singapore election reflects anti-government groundswell

Our correspondent  
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In the general election on May 7, the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore for half a century, suffered its heaviest-ever blow. Opposition parties won a combined 39.9 percent of the popular vote despite intimidation by the government and hostile coverage in the local media. The PAP's vote of 60.1 percent was down from 66.6 percent in 2006 and 75.3 percent in 2001.

The opposition vote was not transformed into parliamentary seats, however. Under Singapore's anti-democratic electoral laws, seats are not allocated proportionately in multi-seat constituencies. Instead, the winner takes all. Nevertheless, the Workers Party won a five-seat constituency for the first time and three other seats, boosting opposition numbers to 8 in the 87-seat parliament. Two cabinet ministers were unseated, including the foreign minister, George Yeo.

The opposition vote reflected a broader anti-government groundswell. Tens of thousands of Singaporeans flocked to opposition rallies in the week before the election to express their anger over the PAP's pro-business policies. The main issues confronting working people and small shop owners are the increasing rents for HDB-flats (government-subsidised high-rise apartments), which have doubled in the past decade, rising food prices and overcrowded public transport. Small increases in wages and salaries have not compensated for inflation.

Since 1970, the island's population has more than doubled from some 2 million people to over 5 million in 2011. The government has set a goal of expanding

the population still further to 6.5 million to be competitive with cities like London, Hong Kong and New York. For Singaporeans, the result is falling living standards due to higher costs, congested shopping malls and crowded public transport. The population density has increased from 3,500 to 7,500 people per square kilometre since 1970.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's government is focused on encouraging multinational companies and financial institutions to open headquarters and businesses in the city-state. Local middle-sized businesses are being overwhelmed by the competition and neglected by the government. To drive down wages, the PAP has allowed foreign companies to employ cheap labour from China and Bangladesh on rates of \$5 (\$US4) an hour and even less in construction and service industries.

The PAP has not expanded basic services such as the national health service to match the growing population. It is not uncommon for people to sit in the waiting room of a local medical practitioner for three hours before being treated. To get an appointment with a medical specialist, the waiting time can easily be two to three months. A seriously sick person can even die waiting to see a specialist. Of course, if you can afford private care, you will receive premium treatment at premium prices.

Singapore's Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality (0=complete equality, 100=highest inequality)—is 42.5, the second highest in the UN's rankings of 36 economically advanced countries. It has the highest density of millionaires of any country due to its role as a major regional financial centre. Many

hedge funds and banks have shifted their headquarters to Singapore to take advantage of its low taxes and fees.

The PAP has remained in power for nearly 50 years through a mixture of shameless pork barrelling and police-state measures. For years the ruling party has used government funds to give preferred treatment to the constituencies where it gained the most votes at elections. HDB flats were renovated, public swimming pools and sports centres set up. By contrast, constituencies with strong support for the opposition parties were neglected.

During this year's election campaign, the prime minister's father, PAP founder and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, blatantly warned voters against supporting the opposition in the closely contested constituency of Aljunied. "If Aljunied decides to go that way, well Aljunied has five years to live and repent [before the next election]," he told the *Straits Times*. "We accept the verdict of the people, but they must also accept the consequences of their actions. You must expect the PAP to look after PAP constituencies first."

The PAP was founded in 1954 as an anti-colonial party by a group of young professionals who had studied in Britain. It was hoisted into political prominence with the assistance of the Stalinist Communist Party of Malaya, which had gained considerable influence in the trade unions in Singapore following World War II. By subordinating the working class to the capitalist PAP, the Communist Party played the essential role containing the mass post-war, anti-colonial movement.

Having exploited the Stalinists to help stabilise bourgeois rule, the PAP turned on its former allies. As Lee Kuan Yew described the process in his memoirs, he "flushed" the PAP of the Communist Party members in the early 1960s and consolidated his rule through a series of autocratic measures. After its split from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore was left without the natural resources of the Malay Peninsula and a much-reduced workforce. The Lee government turned to open-market measures to attract foreign investment and

transform the island-state into a regional financial hub.

Singapore's dependence on international trade and financial markets has left it highly vulnerable to the ongoing global economic crisis. Singapore rapidly plunged into recession in 2008-09, with many container terminals in the harbour standing idle, reduced airline traffic and a sharp fall in the number of tourist visitors.

While the PAP government has imposed the brunt of the crisis onto working people, the opposition parties, including the Workers Party, offer no alternative. Rather they represent less-competitive layers of local business, which, in conditions of economic downturn, are struggling to survive. Alongside calls for government assistance for local businesses, the opposition promoted populist measures to tax the rich and also stirred up resentment against foreign workers, blaming them for the social crisis caused by capitalism.

Nonetheless, the election result does in a distorted fashion represent a shift in Singaporean politics as working people seek to find a way to express their opposition to the government and its pro-business policies. And if this one-party island-state is feeling the winds of change, it is a harbinger of broader upheavals throughout the region.



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