

Elections After Lee Kuan Yew

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Credit: REUTERS

How will Lee Kuan Yew's legacy play out in the next elections?

The passing of Singapore's first Prime Minister at age 91, on 23 March 2015 prompted a huge outpouring of grief not seen in this country before. Singaporeans saw the formation of long snaking lines to pay respect to the man oft-dubbed as the father of the nation.

September has been tipped as the most likely date for an Election here after changes to the electoral boundaries were made. In honour of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's contributions to Singapore, a tribute segment is slated to be shown at Singapore's much-publicised 50th anniversary celebrations.

It is the golden jubilee celebrations for the nation and possibly a golden opportunity for the PAP.

The "LKY dividend"

Academician and writer Dr Kirpal Singh, 66, says nostalgia and sentimentality have, at least for the moment, "a lot of impact on the Singaporean psyche."

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Dr Singh says sympathy votes could shore up support for the PAP because many Singaporeans feel Mr Lee Hsien Loong is caught between his duty as the Prime Minister and his personal anguish as Mr Lee Kuan Yew's son.

Some years back when interviewed by the New York Times on his legacy, Mr Lee said "the final verdict will not be in the obituaries. The final verdict will be when PhD students dig out the archives."

A sociologist from National University Singapore, Dr Tan Ern Ser observes that Lee Kuan Yew was a larger-than-life figure in Singapore's history; "As LKY was Singapore as well as the PAP, his passing has left behind a LKY dividend, manifested in the feeling of goodwill and gratitude towards him," he says.

Dr Tan thinks this dividend would give the PAP a leg up in the next elections.

A matter of policy

The current PAP leaders could suffer, though, if they are compared unfavourably to Lee Kuan Yew. On the other hand, if they are able to "convince voters that they have produced good results, despite the different challenges," they could be seen to have built on the elder statesman's achievements, says Dr Tan.

In the 2015 budget earlier this year, the government had introduced the Silver Support scheme for the poorer segments of the senior population and increased the amount given out as GST vouchers.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Dr Gillian Koh, 48, sees such redistribution policies introduced as PAP's effort to build "a fair and equitable society

"The question on the policy-side," she says, "is whether voters know of this and feel the effects of it and feel the national solidarity that the governing party says it is trying to achieve."

For those voting it is possible that other more bread and butter issues may be the deciding factor rather than the issue of leadership within the party or policies per se. For polytechnic student, Jason Ng Kah Chun, the rising cost of living will be a big factor in how he votes. Mr Lee's legacy will not matter, he says.

"Leaders need to be tested"

At this year's May Day rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put the spotlight on leadership renewal when he said it would be the most important issue in the next elections.

"Give me and my team your support so that after the next election, and well before the election after that, a younger team will be ready to lead us forward," he said.

"The PAP has been readying itself by reiterating what it stood for right from the start," says Dr Koh, "so that it will not just be LKY's history but the country's future that it will campaign on."

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Some people might draw a comparison between the current PAP leaders and those of Lee Kuan Yew's generation. Dr Singh thinks this is not entirely fair as the current leaders lack the "political grit" the pioneer leaders needed to hone during Singapore's formative years.

"Leaders need to be tested," he says. While he is concerned that some of those in power might not always be willing to be tested, he also thinks the current generation should be more patient with new leaders.

Whither the opposition?

The late Lee Kuan Yew had said Singapore has a shortage of talent and cannot have two top-class political parties.

Former History and Social Studies teacher in Yusof Ishak Secondary School Mr Lee Yue Heng, 37, had thought the statement was arrogant but has since changed his mind. One of the reasons for this is the ongoing debacle over the Workers' Party's management of its town council.

He does not think there is a credible opposition yet and would rather put his trust in the long-serving PAP. He feels that WP's mistakes in a series of trial and error moves shows them up as ill equipped politicians – more noise in parliament than capable of running a country.

"Why should the taxpayers pay the tuition fees for the opposition?" he says.

Reform Party Secretary General Kenneth Jeyaretnam understands the concern over an untested opposition but thinks "it is a slightly ridiculous idea that Singapore will collapse if the PAP are not in charge."

At the PAP's 60th Anniversary rally last year, Lee Hsien Loong said the next elections will be a serious fight.

The elections must be held by January 2017 and will determine if the opposition parties gain a further foothold in parliament or if the PAP maintains its majority.