

# **SINGAPORE'S OPPOSITION COMMUNITY – GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS IN THE CONCRETE JUNGLE**

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## **Abstract**

Based on data gained from qualitative research techniques, this paper presents and discusses the opinions of leading Singaporean oppositional grassroots activists about the state of play in Singaporean politics and civil society and likely developments over the next ten years. Our interviewees show that the Singaporean grassroots opposition activist community, while small, is passionate and committed to taking its country away from the right-wing authoritarian pathway. Those activists more interested in civil society and NGOs than contesting elections are eager to expand and deepen the civil society in Singapore. We also find that certain school-age opposition activists have already decided that the official establishment ideology, as taught in school textbooks, is not the reality of Singapore's history as they understand it. Activists will continue to focus on the income-inequality problem and human rights issues surrounding Article 377A of the Penal Code (which continues to make homosexual sexual acts between males illegal), the *Internal Security Act* (which allows detention without trial), and use of defamation suits by ruling-party politicians to bankrupt opposition party politicians and activists.

*Keywords: Alienation, Civil society, Grassroots activism, Income inequality, Poverty, Singapore opposition parties, Singapore politics, Youth activism.*

## **Introduction**

Based on data gained from qualitative research techniques, this paper presents and discusses the opinions of leading Singaporean oppositional grassroots activists about the state of play in Singaporean politics and civil society and likely developments over the next ten years. We use interviews as the primary source of data and we study only oppositional and not pro-government activists as recommended by Gomez (2008, p. 592, p. 610, n. 1) in his study of the use of the internet by Singaporean activists. Soon and Kluver (2007, pp. 259, 260) and Gomez (2008, p. 592) suggest that the use of interviews rather than, or as well as, content analysis of publicly available data such as websites will suggest reasons why actions were taken and suggest paths not taken but which were once considered possible. As most Singaporean political research focuses exclusively or primarily upon the ruling People's Action Party (人民行動黨) (PAP) studies focusing on the opposition are needed to highlight detail, context, and motivations. The opposition should not be dismissed in just a few sentences of generalizations in the midst of PAP-centric literature (Lyons and Gomez, 2005). Instead researchers should 'look beyond the PAP' (Lyons and Gomez, 2005, p. 129). Gomez (2008, p. 610, n. 1) points out that '[t]here is very little research on opposition parties in Singapore because self-censorship and caution keep researchers away from this aspect of the city-state's politics'. Furthermore, we obtain direct and personal access to Singapore's grassroots opposition community, including people (aged 14 to 65 years) that are not party leaders or spokespersons and who are difficult to access.

## **Study background - Political context**

As at the dates of sixteen out of the 23 interviews (22 September 2009 – 6 May 2011), the combined opposition held two seats in parliament, Potong Pasir SMC held by Mr. Chiam See Tong (詹時中) of the Singapore People's Party (新加坡人民黨) (SPP) and Hougang SMC held by Mr. Low Thia Khiang of the Workers' Party of Singapore (新加坡工人黨) (WP) (Singh, 2011, pp. 49, 181, 186, 212). The remainder of the elected seats was held by PAP which maintained a complete monopoly in the Singaporean Parliament between 1968 and 1981 (Ang, 2011, p. 99; Chee, 2012, p. 392; Lee, 2012, p. 314; Singh, 2011, pp. 136, 184-186). SPP's Mr. Chiam contested for SPP in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC at the 2011 General Election (hereafter GE) (Singh, 2011, p. 220) while his wife, Madam Lina Loh, contested in Potong Pasir SMC.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately both Chiams were unsuccessful in their respective contests with Potong Pasir SMC being returned to PAP by a mere 114 votes (7,878 for SPP versus 7,992 for PAP) (Au Young and Durai, 2011; Hussain, 2011; Singapore-elections.com; Singh, 2011, p. 230).<sup>2</sup> The 2011 GE campaign also saw Mr. Low shift ground to Aljunied GRC where his five-person team was the first opposition team in Singaporean history to win a GRC (Ang,

2011, pp. 103-4; Lee, 2011, p. 245; Leong and Tan, 2011, p. 166; Ortmann, 2011, p. 153; Singh, 2011, p. 232). Low's designated successor or 'prodigy' (Singh, 2011, p. 232), Mr. Yaw Shin Leong, recaptured Hougang SMC for WP, with a 2.06 percentage-point swing in his party's favour (Kor and Chong, 2011; Singh, 2011, p. 182). Overall at the 2011 GE WP scored 46.58% of valid votes in contested constituencies (swing towards WP 8.15 percentage-points). Singh (2011, p. 232) concludes that: 'Because the party was considered to be credible, every candidate benefitted from the WP branding, winning a respectable number of votes'.

At the May 2011 GE, the Singapore Democratic Party (新加坡民主黨) (SDP) polled reasonably well in the two GRCs it contested. SDP scored 39.90% of the vote in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC (32,322 out of 81,004 valid votes) (Singh, 2011, p. 233). SDP's Sembawang GRC team, which consisted of John L. Tan, Dr. James Gomez, Mohamed Isa Abdul Aziz, Sadasivam Veriyah, and Jarrod Luo, scored 36.11% (47,578 out of 131,763 valid votes) (Singh, 2011, p. 233). The swing towards SDP in contested constituencies was a more than respectable 13.53 percentage-points to 36.76% of valid votes (Leong and Tan, 2011, p. 167). SDP has now also been able to attract competent candidates (unlike the opposition bicycle thieves and slipper men of local political myth) such as Dr. Ang Yong Guan, Dr. James Gomez, Michelle Lee, Tan Jee Say, and Dr. Vincent Wijesingha (who announced his resignation from SDP by a Facebook posting on 29 August 2013) (Singh, 2011, p. 213). Singh (2011, p. 233) put forward the following viewpoint: 'While the SDP did not win any seats in Parliament, the party moved up from being one of the worst performers in 2006 to a more mainstream party, garnering much support and respect'.

Hougang SMC was subjected to a by-election on 26 May 2012 after Yaw was fired by WP for failing to clarify allegations relating to his alleged personal indiscretions (Anonymous, 2013b). This by-election saw WP's Mr. Png Eng Huat (ex-East Coast GRC team) win the seat (but the swing towards PAP was 2.72 percentage-points). At a 26 January 2013 by-election, WP's Ms. Lee Li Lian comfortably won Punggol East SMC thus proving the new strength of the WP brand-name (Singh, 2011, p. 232) at least in the eastern part of the island (swing towards WP 13.49 percentage-points). Arguably this 2013 by-election has now created a situation in Singapore where most seats are a fifty-fifty chance of going either way. However, such a theory has not yet been tested at a GE.

## **Research questions and method**

The research questions posed to all of our study's interviewees are as follows:

1. Explain the events in your life that caused you to become an opposition supporter.

2. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition party you are most closely associated with?
3. What do you think will happen to Singapore politics in next 10-15 years and how many seats will the opposition win at next election?
4. What do you think of Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) Youth and internet political activism?
5. What do the opposition parties need to do to go from 25% to 50.1% and what type of people make up that next 25% that the opposition must win over?

The data sources for the present study are: literature search, participant-observation, and semi-structured interviews. Twenty-three (23) people were interviewed in person (four of those interviewed twice) plus nine interview responses were sent and returned by e-mail. Four people who sent e-mail responses were also interviewed in person so the total number of respondents is 28. Of the 23 people interviewed in person, twelve are classified as 'activists' and eleven are classified as 'politicians'. In this context, a 'politician' is defined as either a party leader (executive committee member) and/or someone who has contested at a past general election or by-election. An activist is a 'non-politician'. Participant-observation includes the first-mentioned author's attendance at SDP's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner held on 27 February 2010 and SDP's 31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Dinner held on 19 February 2011. This author also attended the election night count and press conference with SDP politicians and supporters held at the Quality Hotel (Balestier Road) on the night of 7-8 May 2011.

The remainder of the paper is organized into three sections plus a Conclusion. The following three sections are headed 'A Woman's Voice', 'Voice of the Youth', and 'Voices of the Alienated Heartlands'.

*A Woman's Voice - Ms. Jaslyn Go (SDP activist, possible future SDP political candidate)*

If Glenda Han is or was the glamour woman of WP, then Jaslyn Go must fulfil this role for SDP (but Jaslyn, like Glenda, goes far beyond the provision of glamour). Jaslyn, a 37-year-old and married mother-of-two (age as at date of interview, 22 September 2009), is a committed SDP supporter and activist who has been a regular participant at SDP protest activities since the 18-person *Tak Bole Tahan* protest against the rising cost-of-living (Chee, 2012, p. 119) on World Consumer Day, 15 March 2008. Jaslyn has been charged and given the option of a substantial fine or a short jail term for illegal protests in a public place, on more than one occasion, alongside other SDP leaders Secretary-General Dr. Chee Soon Juan, Assistant Secretary-General John L. Tan, Gandhi Ambalam, and Chee Siok Chin (Chee, 2012, pp. 193, 389). She is associated with the SDP Women's Wing. Jaslyn was one of the speakers at SDP's (legal) rally at Hong Lim Park on 13 November 2010 and she presented the party's official Chinese New Year message which

appeared on SDP's website [www.yoursdp.org](http://www.yoursdp.org) in February 2011. There is a possibility that Jaslyn will contest as an SDP candidate at forthcoming GEs. However, due to family commitments, she did not contest at the 2011 GE.

Jaslyn is very concerned about the ongoing problem of poverty in Singapore, especially among the working-class and elderly. While the average monthly wage increased from S\$3,872 in 2009 to S\$4,089 in 2010, the median monthly wage was only S\$2,400 in the former year (Singh, 2011, p. 215). The substantial difference between the average and median wages suggests 'a strong polarisation between high-wage earners and low-wage earners' (Singh, 2011, p. 119). Similarly, Chee (2012, p. 44) writes (citing Leong, 2012) that the median gross monthly wage of low-income workers such as cleaners fell 25% in the last ten years (2000-10), from S\$1,277 to S\$960. The median wage for cleaners of industrial building was even lower in 2010 at S\$600 (Leong, 2012). Leong (2012) reports that real wages for town council cleaners fell 38% over the decade from S\$1,277 in 2000 to an inflation-adjusted S\$787 in 2010 (in year 2000 dollars). Over the same period the number of people earning S\$10,000 a month or more increased by a multiple of four (Chee, 2012, p. 44). Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) (2010) reports that the Gini Coefficient for employed households in Singapore (a coefficient measuring inequality with 1.000 indicating complete inequality) has risen from 0.444 in 2000 to 0.481 in 2008 while the ratio of average income of the top 20% to lowest 20% of employed households has risen from 10.1 to 13.0 over the same period. Singh (1992, p. 137) stated as long ago as 1992 that 'the country was now confronted with a clear class problem'. Goh (2010, p. 85) states that 'poverty still exists amidst plenty'.

In this sub-section Jaslyn recounts her experiences growing up in a poor family in the Bukit Merah district of Singapore in the 1970s. This was the first generation of HDB (Housing and Development Board) government flat dwellers after PAP demolished the original village 'kampongs' granting the former residents of these villages sub-par compensation for the taking of their homes and land (Jarrod Luo, group interview, 22 September 2009).<sup>3</sup> Government flats were mostly rented out in the early years but the balance shifted in favour of so-called 'purchases' (actually 99-year leases) in the period 1971 to 1975-76 (SDP, 2010, Table 10, p. 42).

Jaslyn explained (group interview with Jarrod Luo and Seelan Palay, 22 September 2009) how she developed a social and political consciousness at an early age by growing up in a poor family which was 'estranged from' or 'alienated from' (Marx, 2007, p. 73) the fruits of the city-state's growing prosperity. Jaslyn became very aware of income inequality while still very young and she began to view the elite as people with privileges, privileges that were not being shared equitably with the working-class. Poverty was very evident although the PAP Government tended to focus its attention on the needs and desires of the business

community while denying that poverty remained a problem in the country. This continues to be the case as the senior Lee [Mr. Lee Kuan Yew], MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC, denies that there are beggars in Singapore (according to Mr Yap Puay Tong, group interview, 4 March 2010). At a *Tanjong Pagar Chinese New Year Dinner* in 2009 the senior Lee stated that: 'nobody will be destitute, depending on soup kitchens or begging in the streets [and] [e]veryone has a home ...' (Lee, 2009, cited in Chee, 2012, p. 90). By contrast, the reality is that there are beggars in Mr. Lee's own inner-city constituency. Hyper-capitalism built on the backs of foreign workers, as practised by the PAP Government since independence, certainly has produced its own discontents. Jaslyn was perceptive enough as a pre-teen to observe that the Government's official discourse was not necessarily the reality as experienced by the working-class or by Karl Marx's (1976) 'lumpenproletariat'.<sup>4</sup> Jaslyn described her childhood years as follows, unconsciously slipping into the present tense for dramatic effect, consistent with the Singlish spoken English variant, and perhaps because these memories remain very vivid (group interview, 22 September 2009):

"I grew up in a very poor family; we stay in a one room flat. There are six of us in the family; [we] stay with Grandma as well. Our place is very cramped with so many people living under one roof. I grew up sleeping on the floor without a mattress. Because my parents could not afford electricity, me [*sic*] and my sister went to the Community Centre to have a bath. It was an HDB rental flat, most of the citizens lived in a rental flat, this was the 1970s. My father was on and off working, he was a compulsive gambler. There were many families in this situation. ... All my neighbours were living in these conditions, all staying in one-room flat[s]. ... We saw a lot of quarrelling at that time – mostly it is due to the money or the lack thereof".

Jaslyn explained that one factor that led to her early politicization was the sight of the legendary opposition politician Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam (JBJ)<sup>5</sup> selling political newspapers in the bus interchange and hawker centres (again Jaslyn slips into the present tense):

"I live near where JBJ lived; the [grassroots] opposition sentiment for JBJ was quite strong. I saw him at the interchange selling books and newspapers. This was the 1970s / early-1980s. I remember seeing him in the train station. Even though we were very poor my mother tried to dig up money to buy a newspaper from him".

Feminist and anti-death-penalty activist Ms. Rachel Zeng also recounted that seeing opposition politicians and volunteers on the campaign trail and selling

party newspapers was part of her politicization experience at a young age (personal interview, 29 April 2013).

Jaslyn then went on to describe her schooling years and the part-time jobs she took to support herself through school:

“I was even too poor to go to school. I was very fearful in regards paying school fees as I was afraid my teacher would ask for school fees. My school was far from my place. Walking to school took 30 to 40 minutes. Public transport was out of the question. I had to walk through the factories and was chased by dogs. In my secondary years, I had to support myself. I worked as waitress [and] in factories and McDonald’s. I worked six to eight hours a day, seven days a week. Whenever I went to school I was always tired. I remember in school that none of my friends went through what I had gone through. They seemed to have no problems buying in the canteen. They are seriously not as poor as me. I was just surviving”.

Moving on to today’s Singapore, Jaslyn, Jarrod, and Seelan contrasted the one-room rental flats and the five-room flats that stand opposite each other physically in Bukit Merah but represent a vast social divide. SDP activist Seelan described living conditions today in the one-room rental apartments in Bukit Merah as follows (group interview, 22 September 2009):

“It’s very depressing. There are no [internal] walls; it is eight metres by six metres. There are two different worlds [standing opposite each other in Bukit Merah]. When the loan sharks want to target you, they throw the red paint on the door. Many [flats] have red paint on their doors. Just opposite are the expensive HDB flats. You can see how unjust it is. You can see each other from each other’s windows. Grandma, father, girl, mother, [and] two boys [might] live in a room six metres by seven metres. You can survive; they have a roof over their heads. What about the kids? They will think study is no good for them. Many social problems multiply from there. This is Lee Kuan Yew’s constituency. He said ‘show me a beggar’ - [well] this is Tanjong Pagar GRC”.

These are living conditions in modern Singapore where the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has reached US\$57,200 per capita (2010 estimate), sixth highest in the world, and higher than many other developed nations including USA (US\$47,400), Australia (US\$41,300), and New Zealand (US\$28,000).<sup>6</sup> However, 14-year-old opposition activist Renarda Yoch (name changed) commented perceptively that: ‘True standard of living, where everyone has proper housing, is more important than GDP per capita’ (group interview, 4 March 2010).

GDP per capita fails to take into account the effects on citizens' real wages and living standards of remittances outside the country by MNCs and foreign workers as well as reinvestment by foreign and local corporations. One lesson of the 2011 GE, even acknowledged by mainstream media (MSM) journalists, is that many people believe that PAP's traditional (economic) 'growth-at-all-costs' strategy should be replaced by a more inclusive growth policy where growth is balanced against other social objectives (see, for example, Chan, 2011; Chia Tok Whee, *The Straits Times [Forum]*, 10 May 2011, p. A22; Singh, 2011, pp. 15-16). Paragraph 8 of the National Solidarity Party's (國民團結黨) (NSP) 2011 Election Manifesto states: 'The focus of our economic policies is not so much GDP growth, but wage growth and better quality of life. In our pursuit of economic growth, we need to pay due attention to social costs' (National Solidarity Party (NSP), 2011, Paragraph 8, p. 3). Seelan's above description, whilst not wanting to over-dramatize, brings to remembrance the passages describing 19<sup>th</sup> century Manchester and London in Engels' (1987) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Marx's (1976) *Capital Volume 1* (see especially Chapters 10 and 15), and Jack London's (n/d) *The People of the Abyss* (originally published 1903). Changi International Airport frequently wins awards for world's best airport and yet, only 20 to 25 kilometres away, the poorest of the poor live in Dickensian living conditions, a world away from prosperity, in Lee Kuan Yew's Tanjong Pagar GRC. The poor citizens of the Bukit Merah one room rental flats also effectively do not have the right to vote with the constituency of Tanjong Pagar GRC not having been contested at the past four GEs.

Jaslyn communicated her distress at the way that the elderly poor and the homeless are marginalized, forgotten, and put, in Jarrod's words, 'out of sight [and] out of mind' in modern Singapore with its emphasis on meritocracy, career success, and consumerism. Jaslyn believes that there is little gratitude paid to the senior citizens for their role in building up modern Singapore in the years that have passed since independence. On this point, SDP's Ms. Chee Siok Chin, sister of Dr. Chee Soon Juan, political candidate, and Central Executive Committee (CEC) member, has written that:

"There's not just little gratitude paid to senior citizens. The govt continues to use them by not returning them the full CPF [Central Provident Fund], increases the retirement age, [and] is implicit [i.e. complicit] in their being hired to clean toilets, clean tables at food centres, and other menial jobs [personal e-mail communication with Jaslyn Go dated 20 May 2010 and forwarded to the first-mentioned author]".

Similarly, the Singaporean academic Cherian George (2000, p. 23) writes that: 'Today, most Singaporeans judge people, institutions and policies on their bottom-line contributions to material wellbeing'. George (2000, p. 55) also states that:



‘Similarly, policy-makers looking through the filters of the Asian values debate tend to be unsympathetic to appeals for state welfare from down-and-out Singaporeans – since Asians are supposed to believe in self-reliance’.

SDP and NSP's championing of the cause of the poor, and especially the elderly poor, the most obvious victims of Singapore's hyper-capitalist expansion of the past 50 years, has been an important part of the counter-discourse that these parties have contributed recently to Singaporean life. In almost dialectical Marxist fashion, SDP's promotional literature brilliantly highlights the contradictions inherent in Singaporean hyper-capitalism as many of its photos depict smiling PAP politicians on advertising billboards or modern city-street scenes with the photographs shared by impoverished elderly persons selling cheap goods on the footpath, looking in dumpsters for food or pushing makeshift carts. Jaslyn stated:

“It pains me to see old people treated like that. I can't forgive the Government for treating our elderly [in] this way. They are the ones who built the country up. We went to a nursing home and it is sad to see some of them living like that – forgotten. The elderly in Singapore are not living with any type of dignity. Is that how we reward our elderly? This should not be the way”.

SDP policy includes unemployment insurance and a minimum wage as well as certain other measures designed to tackle the extant poverty problem including extra financial assistance and social programmes for elderly and disadvantaged; removal of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) for daily necessities; increasing of the GST for luxury items; reinstatement of estate duties; and introduction of capital gains tax (Chee, 2012, pp. 58-60; SDP, 2010). Jarrod stated that: ‘It is a huge loss of self-esteem to know you are jobless. There are huge social disincentives to be unemployed [in Singapore] so you cannot say that giving unemployment benefits leads to laziness’ (group interview, 22 September 2009). Jaslyn added: ‘Singaporeans are brought up in such a way that unemployed people are [perceived to be] lazy. Unemployment is not by choice in the current situation. People don't choose to be unemployed. There is social pressure to work. Here the social pressure to work is very strong’ (group interview, 22 September 2009). The social pressure to work suggests that unemployment benefits will not create a widespread culture of laziness in the city-state as PAP's leadership fears. SDP (2010, pp. 23-24) has proposed a minimum wage of S\$6.80 per hour or its equivalent of S\$300 per week, which may not be much compared to A\$15.96 in Australia or £6.19 per hour (aged 21 and older) in the UK but it is important to start somewhere. Retrenchment entitlements are proposed at 75% of last drawn salary for the first six months, reduced to 50% for the second six months, and then

to 25% for the third six months before the benefits cease. A cap will be placed on maximum entitlements (SDP, 2010, p. 25).

Jaslyn is a part of the official Women's Wing of SDP. However, Rachel Zeng, who has been strongly influenced by the Western feminist authors Emma Goldman (1869-1940) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), criticizes the concept of Women's Wing. Rachel argues (personal interview, 29 April 2013) that the Women's Wing concept relegates women to a certain pre-defined subsidiary position where they can do their so-called 'women's business' in security and comfort (much like Tuesday morning 'women's groups' at Protestant churches). In Rachel's words:

"I was not happy when they started this Woman's Wing. It was going backwards. Female participation has always been there. After the [creation of] Woman's Wing it's like telling women 'go to your corner, you need your comfort, you need your space, but men don't'".

Rachel was at one time relatively close to SDP but she has since drifted away. She comments as follows about her gradual drift away from SDP:

"I'm not so close to them nowadays. In the first place I don't believe in party politics. I hanged out with SDP because they were really supportive of me. All my life people thought I was a strange person. Why can't you fit the system? When I hanged out with SDP I didn't feel that way, it was really good. At that time, to be honest, SDP was not behaving like a political party; they were down-to-earth, activists, like a big family. After a while things changed, I guess, directions changed" [personal interview, 29 April 2013].

Jaslyn identifies with SDP's pro-active political activism which includes peaceful protests and demonstrations. She has strong relationships with the 20-35 year-olds in SDP's Youth Wing including the Facebook opposition activist community whose members might have zero ties, weak ties, or strong ties with SDP. When asked about her motivations for being politically active, Jaslyn referred to leaving behind a better country for her two children. If we can summarize her political position, the conclusion is that she is most obviously against the culture of cruelty or indifference that has been an inevitable by-product of PAP's elitist eugenics ideology (Chee, 2012, p. 129) and its myopic economic development focus (Chee, 2012, pp. 42, 335). Her views could be described as centre-left humanitarian. Like SDP's leadership, she is in favour of workers' rights but sees the issue within the broader context of civil rights and the right to freedom of association. She is a liberal-democrat rather than a socialist.

People like Jaslyn give the opposition movement focus and drive as well as badly needed maturity. Like 35-year-old democracy and human rights activist

Roderick Chia, she is a member of that oft-ignored 'middle generation', Generation X, which can link the older opposition party leaderships to the younger 20-35-year-old members of the Facebook generation. Jaslyn's political and social beliefs have been forged during half a lifetime of personal experiences and reflections and they will not change overnight. Roderick Chia commented that 'the opposition needs people like Jaslyn' (personal conversation with first-mentioned researcher, 9 May 2011).

*Voice of the Youth: Mr. Yap Puay Tong (age 17) and Mr. Renarda Yoch (name changed) (age 14) (opposition supporters and activists)*

On the first-mentioned author's last full-day in Singapore on his March 2010 research trip (4 March 2010), he was scheduled to interview 17-year-old Junior College 1 student Mr. Yap Puay Tong and 14-year-old Secondary 3 student Mr. Renarda Yoch (name changed) in the distant HDB housing estate of Tampines at 4pm. The train trip involved the researcher leaving the familiar environs of the inner-city and the tourist precinct to travel north-east on the West-East MRT Line into the world of Singapore's socially-engineered HDB estates where the percentages of each official ethnic group in each precinct and tower block are monitored and controlled to prevent the development of ethnic enclaves (Lai, 1995; Lyons, 2000, p. 77; Singh, 2011, p. 49).

Renarda (14-years-old at the date of the interview but turning 15 in calendar year 2010) was in secondary school while Puay Tong was in Junior College or JC. Renarda came across as an intelligent, thoughtful, and articulate 14-year-old. He had decided that the official establishment ideology, as taught in school textbooks, is not the reality of Singapore's history as he understands it. As Renarda says, '[t]he PAP was gerrymandering. The GRC system, it's a mockery of our system. In school we have to talk about democracy. It's all a show'. It is correct that GRCs which have shown strong opposition support, such as Eunus GRC at the 1988 GE and Cheng San GRC at the 1997 GE, have been subsequently dismantled and pro-opposition sections merged into neighbouring pro-PAP GRCs. WP Secretary-General Low Thia Khiang has complained about the 22,000 pro-WP Aljunied GRC voters who were transferred into the relative PAP stronghold of Ang Mo Kio GRC (Singh, 2011, p. 224). In Singapore voting patterns are now made known to the Government at the precinct level which is around 20 HDB blocks or 3,000 voters (Low Thia Khiang, cited in Singh, 2011, p. 224). This makes the transfer of recalcitrant elements into pro-PAP constituencies much easier. Singapore has no independent electoral commission to draw and redraw constituency boundaries in a neutral fashion.

Renarda said that he attended two opposition rallies, five years apart, at the same venue, accompanied by his father. At the time of the first rally he was a 'PAP supporter', as was Puay Tong in his primary school days (Primary 5). At the

second rally Renarda realized that the WP people present were normal patriotic Singaporeans. If his recollections were correct, these two rallies must have been at the 2001 and 2006 GE when Renarda would have been aged only eleven and six respectively.<sup>7</sup> Renarda declared himself at our interview as someone wanting to exercise his democratic rights, learn about his country, and work towards social and political change. Like Puay Tong, he takes his responsibilities as a Singaporean citizen seriously and believes he owes it to his country to work towards creating a kinder and more democratic society. Similarly, Puay Tong stated that: 'I am 100% Singaporean that was born here [and] that would like to see changes for my country'. Renarda commented that he had not decided which opposition party to support but that he had attended SDP's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner on 27 February 2010 because, in his words, '30<sup>th</sup> birthdays do not happen every day'. Renarda declared his total respect for Dr. Chee and for the Facebook activist community which includes the SDP Youth and the Reform Party (RP)'s Alex Tan (formerly of SPP). For his part, Puay Tong rejects the conformist Singaporean ideology and system and especially the pressures to conform and work extremely hard (but where memory work occupies prime position) placed upon students by the primary and secondary schools. He stated that: 'I believe that the education system needs flexibility. ... Our education system needs a reform to suit individual interests rather than everyone keep studying by the books' (see also Chee S.J., *Letter to Senator Barack Obama*, 14 February 2008, reproduced in Chee, 2012, pp. 265-7).

Puay Tong reminisced about a Secondary 4 school teacher, Mr. Wee, who observed Puay Tong's interest in opposition politics and encouraged him further in that direction by taking him to RP open houses.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Wee's evangelistic efforts on behalf of the opposition points to the fact that, because MSM is largely blocked to opposition parties, opposition supporters tend to use personal networks; online vehicles including The Online Citizen, Temasek Review, personal blogs, and Facebook; and self-published books (in the case of Dr. Chee, NSP's Steve Chia, WP's Gerald Giam, and Tan Jee Say (ex-SDP)) to propagate their views and organize their activities. The reasons MSM are largely blocked to opposition parties are direct governmental control 'to suit their political interest' (Thiruchelvam, 2011, p. 92) and 'self-censorship' (Gomez, 2000, 2002; Thiruchelvam, 2011, p. 92) practised by editors and journalists. Puay Tong was reprimanded in school for distributing RP political flyers within the school grounds, a practice which the Ministry of Education (MOE) bans. Furthermore, he has been accused by less politically aware classmates of being 'non-Singaporean' because of his rejection of the dominant ideology. His then teacher, Mr. Wee, suggested that he 'read other party's beliefs so [that he] can see which ideology suits [him] the most'. Puay Tong's present-day philosophy can be well summarized by the following quote:

“I value honesty in politics, honesty to the people, what are you doing and why. Finance and stats [statistics] must be available. This is our country and we want to know. This is your basic duty to let people know what you are trying to do” [group interview, 4 March 2010].

Renarda added, alluding to the ongoing foreign worker issue: ‘My ideology is, I quote Alex Tan, you must create a Singapore for Singaporeans’.

Puay Tong and Renarda are no ‘rebels without a cause’ but mature individuals who have actively questioned the version of the truth contained in the school textbooks and have decided that they prefer Dr. Chee’s version of the Singaporean story to the establishment’s narrative. Renarda stated that: ‘PAP think they are the saviours of Singapore, the textbooks read that way. ... The standard mentality of our generation is that the PAP brought us to greatness’. Both Renarda and Puay Tong reject the textbook claims that Dr. Chee is ‘an infamous politician’, Lim Chin Siong was a ‘left-wing communist who threatened our security’, and Lee Kuan Yew was the politician who played *the* major role in independence.<sup>9</sup> Renarda claimed that, in fact, it was David Marshall, Lim Chin Siong, and Lim Yew Hock who played the major roles in the independence struggle although Renarda was quick to point out that Lim Yew Hock was a ‘compromise politician’ who, as Puay Tong reminded us, instituted the persecution of the left-wing *Barisan Sosialis* (Socialist Front) opposition party. Renarda stated that: ‘There is always the idea in school that *Barisan Sosialis* and Lim Chin Siong and Chia Thye Poh are evil’. In fact, PAP was able to create a world-first for combining ‘creating docile bodies’ (Foucault) with ‘maximizing the rate of profit’ (Marx) because dissident Chia Thye Poh, when shifted to resort island Sentosa whilst still under house arrest (Lee, 2012, p. 322), was forced to work each day on the mainland so that he could, in Renarda Yoch’s words, ‘pay rent for his own jail’.<sup>10</sup>

Slovenian post-communist philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2008, pp. 259-60) argues that although the secret police in the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany numbered 100,000, or four times higher than under the Nazis, this did not amount to, simplistically, four times the level of repression. Žižek (2008, pp. 259-60) writes that the East Germans under Nazism were morally depraved and hence needed much less of a secret police to restrain their instinctual pushes for freedom. By contrast, communism retained an emancipatory Marxist-Leninist aspect even in the former East Germany. Therefore, communism restrained the impulses for freedom whilst simultaneously creating and encouraging many of these same impulses. In the same way, PAP’s determined and relentless 40-year push for excellent English-medium education in Singaporean schools and a demanding school syllabus are the very factors that have directly created young and politically aware intellectuals such as Puay Tong

and Renarda (Singh, 2011, pp 158, 188-189)! One is reminded of Mikhail Gorbachev who was so committed to pursuing his objectives of *glasnost* and *perestroika* for the Soviet Union that he gave further power and encouragement to forces that ultimately undermined and eliminated his own government. The senior Lee himself said in 2008 at the hearing for quantification of damages against Dr. Chee and Chee Siok Chin: 'We have educated them [Singaporeans] to a point where those in the top twenty percent with tertiary qualifications can go to any English-speaking country and find a job' (cited in Chee, 2012, p. 248). Chong (2011, p. 7, emphasis original) writes that: 'And yet, the AWARE saga [where a group of fundamentalist Christian women took over secular women's rights' group AWARE by stealth at the 28 March 2009 AGM] is the very child of economic growth and the expanding middle-class it [PAP] has engendered'. Has PAP engineered its own eventual redundancy (at least in the sense of one dominant party giving way to a two-party system)?

Abdullah (2011) notes that the rise of the middle-class in Malaysian society since the 1990s has shifted Malaysian art away from a 'pure religion' Islamic spirituality focus to a more postmodern and syncretic identity which strongly reflects global Enlightenment values of 'rationalism, individualism, democracy, and secularism' (Abdullah, 2011, p. 102). These values are also of primary importance to the young Singaporean opposition activists Puay Tong and Renarda. Abdullah (2011, p. 102) also states that 'Malay artists began to question their social and cultural position in a wider historical, social, and cultural construct of the nation and global context'. Similarly, we see Puay Tong and Renarda attempting to make sense of their position as Singaporean citizens as well as Singapore's place in the regional and global environments. *Voices of the Alienated Heartlands – the Struggle for Electoral Victory in Tampines GRC*

The word 'alienation' and terms such as 'alienated youth' have entered the world of popular culture. Few people ever think of providing a definition of the word and most people think it refers to a person's subjective feelings. However, if we refer back to the young Karl Marx's (2007) original four-fold theory of alienation contained in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (completed when Marx was only 26-year-old), Marx (2007) argues alienation is an objective fact of the capitalist mode of production. This is because under capitalism labour is social but ownership is private, i.e. private ownership of plant and buildings, private ownership of profit and dividends. The worker under capitalism is alienated (separated) from: (a) the means of production; (b) the products produced; (c) her/his true nature; and (d) other workers.

Arguably Marx's (2007) alienation theory can also be applied to middle-class heartland estate residents' increasing feelings of disassociation with the ruling

PAP<sup>1</sup> since it is a common sentiment (for example, see Tampines GRC NSP team-member Gilbert Goh's 28 August 2013 Facebook posting) that PAP, with its million-dollar salary ministers, does not understand cost-of-living pressures for people earning median-level wages (\$2,400 per month in 2009). Singh (2011, p. 146, emphasis added) writes that: '[t]he sense of elitism within the government has led to concern over the lack of grassroots connections, which in turn may lead to a sense of apathy *and even alienation*'. The then NSP Secretary-General Mr. Goh Meng Seng has claimed (personal interview, 15 October 2010) that former PM Goh Chok Tong's gentle manner, as compared to Lee Kuan Yew's abruptness and occasional rudeness, in fact meant swallowing a 'sweet pill'. The reason was that Goh's cabinet, during the years of his prime-ministership (1990-2004), used more and more tricky 'hyper-capitalist' techniques such as Certificate of Entitlement for motor vehicles (COE), Goods and Services Tax (GST), and Area Licensing Scheme (ALS) (now replaced by Electronic Road Pricing (ERP)) to extract increased rents from the working- and middle-class. As WP's Eric Tan commented (personal interview, 4 March 2010), this was the era when the Singapore Dream became unachievable for many people and the social contract between PAP and the citizenry was first called into question.

Our interviewee Roderick Chia noted that Kenneth Jeyaretnam's Reform Party (RP) targeted the middle-class outer-suburban demographic as part of a conscious strategy in the lead-up to the 2011 GE (see also Marvin S.K. Leong, personal interview, 2 March 2010). Tampines GRC has a large percentage of this demographic (over 30% of voters live in the larger five-room government HDB flats (Tan, 2011, p. 38). This is one of the reasons why NSP's Goh Meng Seng chose to head a team at the 2011 GE to contest this outer-suburban 'heartland' constituency (Tan, 2011, p. 38). Another reason for Goh to contest in Tampines GRC was to contest head-on against PAP's unpopular housing minister Mr. Mah Bow Tan (Singh, 2011, p. 233). Goh's Tampines GRC NSP team ultimately secured 42.78% of the valid votes at the 2011 GE (54,381 out of 127,109) (Singh, 2011, p. 229). Singh (2011, p. 233) concludes that, apart from Goh himself, NSP's team was not well known enough for the majority of voters to dare to choose this team over the PAP team headed by Minister Mah.

In a second online interview with Goh Meng Seng (who now lives in Hong Kong), he reflected on whether he had made mistakes in election strategy in 2011 especially in regards to whether the 'strongest' NSP team should have been sent to Tampines:

"I always believe there is no 'Ifs' in politics. On hindsight, a lot of things should have done better but this lacks consideration of the constraints we face back then. Some feel that we should have gone ahead with the

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the anonymous reviewer for this insightful comment.

Moulmein Kallang contest even if it means a hard clash with a 3 corner fight facing WP and PAP. Some feel that we should send the 'strongest' team to Tampines and should not spread too thin all over Singapore from East to West. But even if we look at the situation now on hindsight, it is actually a right strategy to spread to the West. If we were to concentrate on the East back in GE2011, by next GE NSP will face a very big problem with no wards without three corner fights with WP!" [personal interview, 23 July 2013].

Goh also put forward his thoughts as to what the opposition needs to do to secure Tampines GRC at the next GE 2016:

"Tampines GRC can be won if a few conditions are right: no three or multi-corner fight[s], sensible and reasoned deliberation of National policies, consistency in ground engagement and strengthen literature on the need for the Nation to progress from monologue in power construction to diversity in national construct" [personal interview, 23 July 2013].

Salamat (2011) argues that the Red and Yellow Shirt categories in Thailand are divided more by social class, occupation, and geographic location rather than religion since there are Muslims belonging to both groups. The Red Shirt Muslims, like the middle-class Malaysian artists studied by Abdullah (2011), perceive that politics can be extracted from religion, in the sense that they believe that liberal-democratic values are worth striving for in the realm of civil society or 'civic religion'. In Singapore there are also substantial numbers of Muslims (most but not all of whom are ethnic Malays) supporting both PAP and opposition parties. Since the pure Malay parties such as Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS) have declined in significance in recent decades, Malay-Muslims must either choose a multi-ethnic political party or be swinging voters who vote based on 'pure religion' grounds or for other reasons. James et al. (2011) document Goh Meng Seng's 2011 GE strategy which involved setting up a Malay Bureau within NSP to ease Malays' feelings that NSP was a Chinese-educated party (as it has traditionally been perceived).

Tampines GRC has a high proportion of Malay-Muslim residents, compared to the 2010 national average of 13.39% (Singh, 2011, p. 114), and the fact that it is a marginal constituency at present is clearly consistent with the proposition that Malay-Muslims fall into both pro-opposition and pro-PAP camps. Salamat's (2011) paper clearly shows that people perceive their religion and religious obligations in complex and heterogenous ways and that religion per se is not always a good predictor of voting intentions. PAP's traditional ideology that it was the best party to safeguard Malay-Muslim interests because of its emphasis on multi-racial and multi-religious harmony and meritocracy (Singh, 2011, pp. 12-13, 26, 45) was important to a majority of Malay-Muslim voters in earlier years (Mauzy and



Milne, 2002, p. 109). However, Malay-Muslims who have switched to the opposition do not believe that PAP has an exclusive natural monopoly on either harmonious intercommunal relations or meritocracy. For example, in the 1997 GE campaign, when PAP relentlessly smeared WP's Mr. Tang Liang Hong for being a 'Chinese-language chauvinist' (cited in Chee, 2005, p. 107; Mauzy and Milne, 2002, p. 151), it is unlikely that many non-Chinese or English-educated Chinese voters were convinced of the validity of these allegations.

Bautista (2011, p. 45) writes that '[t]he Philippines is a nation with a strong democratic tradition, a people which takes empowerment seriously'. Unlike in the Philippines, belief in democracy and empowerment are not generally regarded as natural traits of Singaporeans in the post-independence era. Singaporean citizens have entered into a social contract with PAP where political rights have been sacrificed in exchange for economic growth and social stability (Singh, 2011, pp. 15, 200, 251). Nonetheless, there are limits as to how far the electorate can be pushed before its sense of fairness impacts upon its voting behaviour. We can present two good examples: the creditable losing performance of WP in Cheng San GRC in 1997 (when the electorate was distressed by the merciless harassment of Tang Liang Hong) and WP's win in Aljunied GRC in 2011 (when the senior Mr. Lee made negative remarks about Malay-Muslims' integration into society and told Aljunied voters that they would 'repent' if they voted for the opposition) (Mauzy and Milne, 2002, p. 151; Singh, 2011, pp. 217-218, 222-223). The defeated Malay PAP candidate for Aljunied GRC, Zainul Abidin Rasheed, said after the defeat: 'you need only ask the Malays and the Muslims in Singapore – many were hurt by those remarks and remain so' (cited in Singh, 2011, p. 223).

## **Conclusions**

Our interviewees show that the Singaporean grassroots opposition activist community, while 'small' (Ortmann, 2011, p. 159), is passionate and committed to taking its country away from the right-wing authoritarian pathway. Those activists more interested in civil society and NGOs than contesting elections are eager to expand and 'deepen' (Conversi, 2012, p. 798) the civil society in Singapore. Academic writers such as Dr James Gomez (SDP / ex-WP) and Dr. Vincent Wijesingha (ex-SDP), as well as the PhD-educated Dr. Chee, have made some inroads into public consciousness by their repeated efforts over many years to propagate the opposition's cause through books, websites, NGOs, and public speeches at Hong Lim Park. It is very difficult to measure how effective this work has been. However, we should take note of the strong displays by WP and, to a lesser extent, SDP and NSP at the 2011 GE and at the 2012 and 2013 by-elections. As mentioned, WP received a swing of +8.15 percentage-points at GE 2011 while SDP secured a +13.53 percentage-points swing (albeit from a lower base) at the same election.

Activists will continue to focus on the income-inequality problem and human rights issues surrounding Article 377A of the Penal Code (which continues to make homosexual sexual acts between males illegal), the Internal Security Act (which allows detention without trial), and use of defamation suits by ruling-party politicians to bankrupt opposition party politicians and activists (Mauzy and Milne, 2002, pp. 132-136, 167).

We also find that certain school-age opposition activists have already decided that the official establishment ideology, as taught in school textbooks, is not the reality of Singapore's history as they understand it. Even the establishment author Dr. Bilveer Singh (2011, p. 16) is honest enough to acknowledge that 'the National Education programme has not been well received by many students, who perceive it as nothing more than PAP propoganda'. Although the number of politically active school-age Singaporeans is likely to be small at present, those we interviewed are an important vanguard which may increase greatly in number and influence during the coming decade as the internet proliferates and PAP's hegemonic control of MSM becomes less and less decisive.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr James Gomez and the anonymous reviewer for helpful and insightful comments on an earlier version of this article; all our interviewees; Jaslyn Go, Patrick Lee Song Juan, Jarrod Luo, and Dr. Wong Wee Nam for helping in the arrangement of interviews; and Dr. and Dr. Chee Soon Juan, Roderick Chia, Goh Meng Seng, Jam Cruisers, Dexter Lee, Singa Crew, and Rachel Zeng for constant encouragement. We also thank participants at a research seminar at Centre for South-East Asian Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia (31 March 2011) for valuable constructive feedback.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A Group Representative Constituency (GRC) is a large electoral area where teams of four, five or six opposition candidates compete against the same number of PAP candidates. The GRC system was ostensibly designed to allow for minority ethnic group representation in parliament as each GRC team had to comprise at least one member of Singapore's ethnic minority communities ('Malay' or 'Indian' / 'Other') (Chua, 1995, p. 122; Lyons, 2000, pp. 76-7). The remaining electorates are smaller SMCs (or Single Member Constituencies). The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee report, released in February 2011, increased the number of SMCs to twelve (Anonymous, 2011a; Singh, 2011, p. 36).

<sup>2</sup> Voting results for the 2011 GE were taken from *The Sunday Times (Singapore)*, 8 May 2011 (noon edition), pp. H9-H12. These were checked with finalized results on Singapore-elections.com and changes made where necessary.

<sup>3</sup>Li (2011) even suggests that lingering discontent over the forced demolition of the kampongs may have been a factor behind WP's 2011 GE victory in Aljunied GRC.

<sup>4</sup>For Marx on 'lumpenproletariat', also termed 'dangerous classes', see Marx (1976, p. 797).

<sup>5</sup>BJJ won the seat of Anson on a WP ticket in a 1981 by-election, the first opposition MP to be elected in the country since 1963 and the first to sit in Parliament since 1968 (Lee, 2012, p. 314; Lydgate, 2003, pp. 87-97; Mauzy and Milne, 2002, p. 149). He won the seat again at the 1984 GE (Lydgate, 2003, pp. 124-129; Mauzy and Milne, 2002, p. 149).

<sup>6</sup><https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sn.html>, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand pages [all accessed 18 March 2011] and the United States page [accessed 4 May 2011].

<sup>7</sup>Renarda was probably a little hard on his younger self when he called himself at six-years-old a 'brainwashed citizen'!

<sup>8</sup>It was actually a policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1940s that communist school-teachers should build up friendships with their students so as to influence them positively in the direction of communism and party membership (Darke, 1952, pp. 40-1).

<sup>9</sup>On 21 July 1961 all thirteen left-wing PAP MPs, a faction led by the trade-unionist Lim Chin Siong, were expelled from the party by a majority vote of PAP's Central Executive Committee. They then immediately formed the *Barisan Sosialis* opposition party (Visscher, 2007, p. 142).

<sup>10</sup>Dr. Chia Thye Poh (謝太寶) was the *Barisan Sosialis* MP for Jurong from 1963-66. He was arrested on 29 October 1966 and spent 32 years detained without trial, 23 years of which were spent in prison and nine under house arrest firstly in Sentosa and later on the mainland but subject to other restrictions (Chee, 2005, pp. 33, 111, 2012, pp. 170, 235, 268, 290, 321, 339; Lee, 2012, p. 322).

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