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## **THE REJUVENATION OF THE NSP AND THE REBRANDING OF THE SDP: CONVERSATIONS WITH SINGAPORE'S OPPOSITION POLITICIANS**

*Via detailed personal interviews, this article canvasses the views of leading Singapore oppositional grassroots activists about the state of play in Singapore politics and likely developments over the next ten to fifteen years. We highlight two internet focused activists who have recently switched political parties. Although strong poll performers in 2011, the Workers' Party of Singapore (WP) has lost three important members from its 2006 campaign – Chia Ti Lik, Goh Meng Seng, and James Gomez. In this paper, Goh and Gomez reflect upon their reasons for leaving WP. Goh points to the lack of emphasis placed by the WP upon internet activism which he views as a strategic error. In one key respect Gomez differs significantly in strategy from Goh. Gomez argues that Goh's Malay Bureau within the National Solidarity Party (NSP) reflects outdated, old-school politics which can be contrasted sharply with Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) post-modern multicultural ethos.*

**Keywords:** *Activism, Civil society, Grassroots activism, Internet activism, Opposition parties, Rebranding, Singapore politics, Singapore opposition.*

### **Introduction**

This paper provides a window into the lives and worldviews of two opposition grassroots activists in Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong's 21<sup>st</sup>-century Singapore. In this paper, we pay particular attention to these politicians who are internet-oriented and who have switched political parties recently, namely Dr James Gomez and Mr Goh Meng Seng (hereafter GMS). The resurgent Workers' Party of Singapore (新加坡工人党) (WP) was involved in both of these shifts with Gomez and GMS, along with Mr Chia Ti Lik, all having left the WP in quick succession. The three activists who left the WP after the 06 General Election, Chia (to Socialist Front), GMS (to the National

Solidarity Party (国民团结党) (NSP)), and Gomez (to the Singapore Democratic Party (新加坡民主党) (SDP)), are all relatively young, internet-oriented, and intellectually competent, and will not be easy for the WP to replace. They have all, even if at only the subconscious level, taken the steadying and professional WP influence into their respective new parties. Gomez comments that (personal interview, 10 January 2011, Melbourne): '[These] [t]hree people have left WP with political reputations and political capital'. GMS (personal interview, 15 October 2010, Singapore) has his own Facebook page where he has been active in the three years after he joined the NSP. The NSP's relatively strong performance in the 7 May 2011 General Election (hereafter GE) may be partially due to GMS's internet activism. Although GMS has taken a two-year sabbatical break from political work and has moved to Hong Kong, it is hoped his Party's internet activism and the high public profile it earned during the 7 May 2011 GE under GMS's leadership can be maintained. Gilbert Goh (2011) provides a brief analysis of GMS's June 2011 decision to take a sabbatical break. Ms Hazel Poa has taken over the NSP Secretary-Generalship.

GMS and Gomez have been heavily involved in their respective parties' recent strategic reorientations, with the SDP moving from a civil disobedience approach to an electoral approach and the NSP connecting more strongly with minority communities, younger voters, and women voters, and pursuing a deeper internet presence than previously. Gomez differs significantly in strategy from GMS in certain respects, arguing that the latter's Malay Bureau within the NSP reflects outdated, old-school, ethnic politics which can be contrasted sharply with Gomez' SDP's sophisticated, multicultural ethos. Both the NSP and the SDP did well, in the authors' opinion, at the 7 May 2011 GE although neither party was able to win a parliamentary seat. GMS states that the NSP is aiming to form a coalition government with the ruling People's Action Party (人民行动党) (PAP) in a 'hung parliament' at the end of the next fifteen years.

The 2011 GE was the first in which candidates were permitted to campaign online through Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. PM Lee Hsien Loong held a one hour Facebook chat with internet users where he was inundated with 5,000 comments (Tay, 2011, p. 2). In the battle of the attractive female candidates in Marine Parade GRC, 24-year-old advertising executive Ms Nicole Seah of the NSP was favourably received on Facebook while the PAP's 27-year-old business consultant Ms Tin Pei Ling was unpopular on the new medium with even PAP supporters joining the 'I do not want Tin Pei Ling in Parliament' page. This page had 44,000 'likes' as at 9 May 2011 (Chow, 2011). By contrast, Seah had 93,000 Facebook 'likes' as at 9 May 2011 making her the most popular Singaporean politician online (Tay, 2011). The PAP's team leader in Marine Parade, the Senior Minister (SM) Goh Chok Tong, agreed that the Seah and Tin factors affected the final result in Marine Parade where the NSP lost by a smaller margin than had been generally expected (Chow, 2011). More

generally, younger voters discussed the election online among their friends through Facebook comments and Facebook ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ (Dr Mark Cenite of Nanyang Technological University, cited in Tay, 2011, p. 4). The PAP was increasingly seen as fighting obsolete battles with obsolete weapons (Daniel Yap, *The Straits Times*, 10 May 2011, p. A22). Internet activism among younger voters may well have been partly responsible for the victory by the WP in Aljunied GRC<sup>1</sup> and the pro-PAP vote in contested constituencies falling to a historic low of 60.1%.

In this paper, we provide short case studies where the two primary interviewees reflect upon how and why they first became committed opposition supporters within the Singapore setting. This serves both to set the context and as interesting research information in its own right given that Singapore is a country where people since the mid-1970s, and the youth even more so, have not taken an active interest in politics (Hong and Huang, 2008, pp. 157-62). The rest of this paper is divided, after a Research Methods section, into a James Gomez section and a GMS section with other interviewees’ comments scattered throughout these major sections as and when appropriate. We also report our interviewees’ opinions and perceptions as to where Singapore politics and its opposition parties will head in the next ten to fifteen years and what is needed to increase the opposition presence within the Singapore Parliament beyond the two elected MPs (as at the date of the interviews). The research is important in that it studies the opposition community as both, to use terms often but incorrectly attributed to Karl Marx, a ‘class-for-itself’ as well as a ‘class-in-itself’.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other research which provide limited space to the opposition in works which are predominantly about the PAP, this research studies the opposition community as in-itself and for-itself. We begin to develop a history of the opposition which does not present it as unwanted, excluded other. Such an alternative history is important, especially in this era where the opposition is no longer supported by only the mavericks and the bitter but is able to attract 40% of the vote.

As at the dates of our interviews, the combined opposition held two seats in Parliament, Potong Pasir SMC held by Mr Chiam See Tong of the Singapore People’s Party (新加坡人民党) (SPP) and Hougang SMC held by

1 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, introduced in 1988, 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. The remaining electorates are smaller SMCs (or Single Member Constituencies).

2 Although Marx did not use the actual terms ‘class-in-itself’ and ‘class-for-itself’, his ideas contain the concepts. As Slaughter (1975, Chapter VII, online version) writes: “Working-class consciousness is then, for Marxists, the comprehending in struggle of the process through which the proletariat develops from its identity as formed by capitalism (the mass of exploited wage-labourers, the class ‘in itself’) to the working class organised as a revolutionary force for the taking of power and the building of socialism (the class ‘for itself’)”.

Mr Low Thia Khiang (hereafter LTK) of the WP. The 2011 GE saw LTK strategically shift ground to Aljunied GRC where his five-person team was the first opposition team in Singaporean history to ever win a GRC (Kor and Ong, 2011). LTK's designated successor, Mr Yaw Shin Leong, recaptured Hougang SMC for the WP, with a two percentage-point swing in his party's favour (Kor and Chong, 2011). Mr Chiam contested for the SPP in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC while his wife, Madam Lina Low, contested in Potong Pasir SMC. Both Chiams were unsuccessful in their respective contests with Potong Pasir SMC being returned to the PAP Government by a mere 114 votes (Au Young and Durai, 2011; Hussain, 2011).<sup>3</sup> The second- and fourth-mentioned authors of this paper are Singaporean citizens and registered voters in Potong Pasir SMC.

### Research method and research questions

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

1. Explain the events in your life that prompted you to become an opposition supporter?
2. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of SDP (or the opposition party you are most closely involved with)?
3. What do you think will happen to Singapore politics in the next 10-15 years and how many seats will the opposition win at in the next election?
4. What do you think of 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 the next 25% that the opposition must win over?

The data sources for the present study are: literature search; participant-observation; and semi-structured interviews with opposition politicians and grassroots activists (with fifteen interviewees in person, two of those interviewed twice, and six additional interview responses sent and returned by e-mail). Participant-observation includes the first-mentioned (Australian) author's attendance at the SDP's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner held on 27 February 2010 and the 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 in Balestier Road, Singapore, on the night of 7-8 May 2011.

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3 All voting results for the 7 May 2011 GE are taken from *The Sunday Times [Singapore]*, 8 May 2011, noon edition, pp. H9-H12. Results for 2006 and earlier years are taken from [www.singapore-elections.com/](http://www.singapore-elections.com/)

## **Interview with James Gomez (SDP politician and activist, formerly with the WP)**

Gomez has been involved in opposition activism for over a decade primarily through the South-East Asian NGOs and Think Centres. Ten years ago, he published *Self-Censorship: Singapore's Shame* (Gomez, 2000) and went on a speaking tour of Australia and New Zealand in support of the book. He famously contested for the WP in the 2006 GE in Aljunied GRC where his strong team put up a credible losing performance which saw Sylvia Lim enter Parliament as Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP). Although the 2006 GE minority race certificate issue (<http://www.singapore-elections.com/parl-2006-ge/>) and the resultant government smear campaign against him, is probably what Gomez is best known for in the eyes of most members of the public, for those more actively involved in politics he is known as one of the opposition's strongest intellectuals who has stood out through his media studies research background. Gomez has now resigned from his faculty position at Monash University with plans to set up a new Think Centre NGO in Singapore.

Gomez argues that the main problem inhibiting the development of a deeper and richer civil society is not restrictive laws but people's self-censorship, a good example of Michel Foucault's (1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1981) idea of the goal of the modern state being for people to discipline themselves. George (2008, p. 272) refers, in very Foucauldian fashion (Stivens, 2007, p. 39), to 'behind-the-scenes self-censorship' in relation to the behaviours of editors and journalists working for the Singaporean mainstream media (hereafter MSM). Similarly, in relation to the Singaporean women's group Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), Lyons (2008) writes that: 'The state's heavy hand in matters of civil society meant that AWARE constantly monitored its own behaviour for fear of attracting the state's wrath'. It is not for no reason that Gomez's book was entitled *Self-Censorship: Singapore's Shame*. Gomez explains his thinking on this point as follows:

"The issue was not about [laws restricting people from] doing anything political. There is a lot of room to do things political. There is self-censorship, people are afraid, people do not collaborate or participate. The minions over-administer the legal provisions, they err on the side of caution, [there is] over-constraint. It has continued to be the same since my NUS [National University of Singapore] days".

Similarly, at our first meeting at the SDP headquarters on 22 September 2009, the SDP's Assistant Secretary-General John Tan explained the concept of invisible but heavily-policed 'out-of-bounds' markers within Singaporean society which represent an additional 'surplus-repression' in Freudian terms

(Freud, 1960, 1962; Marcuse, 1966). They constitute a stronger and more aggressive super-ego voice prohibiting actions and behaviours that would seem harmless and benign in many other countries. To cite Freud (1962, pp. 48-9):

“Although it [the super-ego] is accessible to all later influences, it nevertheless preserves throughout life the character given to it by its derivation from the father-complex – namely, the capacity to stand apart from the ego and to master it. It is a memorial of the former weakness and dependence of the ego, and the mature ego remains subject to its domination. As the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so the ego submits to the categorical imperative of its super-ego”.<sup>4</sup>

The term ‘out-of-bounds-markers’ (Barr, 2008, p. 229; Lyons, 2008, p. 256) was first used by the then PM Goh Chok Tong in late 1994 in his written response to an earlier *Straits Times* commentary by the novelist Catherine Lim (Lyons, 2008, p. 256). However, Goh ‘merely provided a common language with which to name an already internalised mode of behaviour’ (Lyons, 2008, p. 260). John Tan states that Singaporeans pass on the boundary markers to their children by actions and example rather than by words in the same way that other behavioural constraints are passed on to children that do not relate specifically to the Singaporean context. George (2008, p. 276) may not be correct, at least in relation to PAP supporters and the apolitical, when he states that: ‘[T]he dominant ideology ... has not reached the ultimate status of internalised common sense’. The SDP’s Jarrod Luo comments further:

“As I grew up I realized the social culture pervades through all levels of society. People dare not ask questions, people in authority cannot be questioned. I can’t bring myself to be assimilated into this culture if you will. It’s a very fundamental feeling. ... I witnessed how they [the Establishment] socially engineered the populace through various policies, incentives, disincentives; we are being treated like lab rats – press red button you get shock, press green button you get ten days of food. ... Now that I have finished my study I want to be full contributing adult in my society. They just want us to remain economic digits. It’s an absolute violation of my personal space and my life decisions are made without consulting me” [group interview, 14 October 2010, Singapore].

From 2001-06 Gomez remained an ordinary member of the WP which was beginning to attract the attention of a large swathe of voters who were dissatisfied

4 Citing Freud is something of an in-joke as John Tan previously worked as a psychology lecturer at the Singapore campus of James Cook University.

with the PAP but who still preferred a relatively safe and conservative political machine. During this era, the WP's focus on electoral politics could be contrasted with the SDP's emphasis on civil disobedience. In the 2006 GE, Gomez contested as part of the WP's team in Aljunied GRC and there was a negative media campaign by the Government in relation to the issue of Gomez's minority race certificate. He argues that the negative campaign backfired (the WP performed well in Aljunied) because voters wanted to debate real issues and were disappointed when the campaign degenerated into old-style, personal attacks (which had worked well for the PAP even as recently as the 97 GE and the Tang Liang Hong affair).<sup>5</sup>

Gomez then talks about his strategy in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 GE and this has not been given sufficient attention in other published sources. He decided to withdraw from public view during the years from 06 to 08 'so as not to confuse the electorate in the interim' (personal interview, 10 January 2011, Caulfield campus, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia). He then decided to focus on his career development. He completed his PhD in 08 and then went to Japan for postdoc after completing his job in Sweden. In May 09, he accepted the faculty position at Monash in Melbourne. As Gomez explains: 'Between 06 and 08, there was little mention of James Gomez in the [Singaporean] media, not even on the internet. I withdrew from writing. I didn't want to cloud it [his public image]. The first time I came into the news was three years later'. In December 08, he graduated with his PhD from Monash and this attracted significant attention from the media as Singapore is a country where academic qualifications bestow enormous prestige. As Gomez elaborates:

"Boom, suddenly I was back in the news with PhD and postdoc. It was a strategic comeback as I knew negative campaigning would make a comeback. MSM would always refer back to the thing that put you in the news last time. I know it would take some work to flush this out of the system [personal interview, 10 January 2011]".

Gomez shows the shrewdness of his strategic political thinking here and it is clear that his academic training in brand recognition informs his practical decisions to great effect and vice versa. He kept out of the limelight for three years and when he returned he had a significant positive factor next to his name in terms of his PhD qualification. This made it more difficult for the MSM to bring the minority race certificate issue back into the centre of their focus. If they did so, then the people would perceive that the MSM was living in the past. Gomez also shows awareness of something referred to by the NSP contestant in Hong Kah GRC at the 97 GE, Dr Wong Wee Nam, who told the researcher (personal interview, 1 March 2010, Singapore) that the opposition

5 For more on the Tang Liang Hong affair see Seow (2006).

has always had to deal with the spectre as well as the continuing reality of the Government and the MSM making disparaging remarks about the 'lack of quality' of opposition candidates with quality understood to refer largely to academic qualifications and professional status. The practical benefits of Gomez's education are that they better allow him to make informed expert comments on Singaporean society and his increased ability to now function as a research mentor to younger scholars/ activists who would later include the present paper's second- and fourth-mentioned authors.

Gomez next discusses the reasons for his unexpected switch from the WP to the SDP in 2010. Although, in terms of Melbourne football it might be seen as the equivalent of moving from Carlton to Collingwood (!), given Gomez's own focus on personal branding the move might not be as significant to him as it has been to some outside observers such as the anonymous, Singapore-based, online commentator Bryan Ti (not his real name). Gomez places more emphasis on his (polite and respectful) manner of leaving the WP rather than his actual reasons for leaving. In Gomez's words:

"I felt leaving WP at the appropriate moment was important. I understand Singapore is a small place; you have to work with all these people for the next 20 years. I looked after their interests too, any exit should be smooth. After three years it was good timing. In January 2010 I let my [WP] membership lapse. I knew when I made the announcement it would be news. For nine months prior we had [the NGO] SFD [Singaporeans for Democracy] in the works. I showed in 2010 I am out of WP. The public knew they had not heard much of me for three years. The public has formed its own opinion that based on my temperament and type of politics WP was not suitable for me. I always take my bearing from the ground [because] this points to [where you will receive] your support in terms of resources, time, and money. The ground supported me to leave WP. ... I left delicately and sophisticatedly. I gave a warning a week before to key members of the WP".

Gomez implies here that his incompatibility with the WP was a further reason for his low public profile from 06 to 08. Gomez may have perceived that the social justice focus of the SDP is more in line with his own vision and the same can be said for the high priority the SDP gives to its internet footprint. The SDP's Ms Chee Siok Chin comments on her own personal social-justice focus as follows:

"I don't for one minute regret having left mainstream work, to advocate for justice. I'm seeking social justice and accountability. It's the most empowering thing in my life to stand up and get the



Government to respond even if it is in the most harsh and draconian manner” [group interview, 14 October 2010, Singapore].

Gomez indicates that he was proactively sought out and pursued by the SDP ‘informally for a year’. He undertook a few activities with the party and found ‘similar synergies’. Gomez discusses the issue of rebranding of the SDP, a shift in party emphasis which has taken place over the last year or two which clearly suggests a strategic move away from the civil disobedience approach to a more elections-focused approach. Gomez is probably at the centre of all such rebranding initiatives. He comments as follows on the important topic of SDP rebranding which many commentators perceive is vital for the SDP if it is to improve its performance in future elections. These commentators point out that many conservative Singaporeans cannot adjust to the concept of wilful law-breaking regardless of how important the underlying point might be. Gomez comments on the SDP rebranding issue as follows (emphasis added):

“Rebranding can take many forms. The most extreme form is changing the leader. You can change name, colour, [and/or] approach. This requires acceptance of stakeholders of the Party. SDP have decided to take a change in approach. *The thrust of the change is from civil disobedience to the electoral approach.* There is a momentum that has come through. People sense this change. The challenge now is to take this rebranding to the ground. Successful management of electoral communications is evidence of rebranding. The SDP’s approach is contemporary, reflecting globalization, multiculturalism, etc. That’s the brand, it’s contemporary, it looks new, and it’s refreshing. This is informed by the type of people you have. The frontlines give you a sense of internationalism, being contemporary, etc.”

Gomez’s description of the SDP brand, based on the ethos of the grassroots campaigners, seems to the authors to be fair and accurate. While older party members and supporters, such as John Tan, Dr Wong Wee Nam, Dr Chee Soon Juan, and Chee Siok Chin, base their worldview on traditional, small-l liberalism, younger advocates in their 20s and 30s tend to adopt a more post-modern, international, and multicultural approach (which can be characterized, in shorthand form, as being more ‘Chomsky’ than either ‘Trotsky’ or ‘Tolstoy’). These younger internet activists, such as Chong Kai Xiong, Jaslyn Go, Jarrod Luo, Seelan Palay, Mhd Khalis Rifhan, Martyn See, and Rachel Zeng, tend to view Singapore as just a spot on the globe which should operate in line with international viewpoints on democracy and human rights and developments in the region and beyond. These activists are wary of flag-waving patriotism as it does not accord with their internationalist outlook and they are aware that ‘founding fathers’ patriotism has been an important source of PAP power and

ideology. It could be said that Gomez and Wijeyesingha are the new public faces and rallying points for this younger group of SDP internet activists.

It should be pointed out that the rebranding, associated with Gomez and involving other 'moderates' Ang Yong Guan, Michelle Lee, and Tan Jee Say, is best viewed as what the Marxists used to term, a change in 'tactics', as opposed to a more fundamental change in philosophy or beliefs at least as far as the extant party leadership is concerned. For example, Mao Zedong called for a united front with the KMT nationalists in the 1937 war against Japan, claiming that the distinction between the Chinese and the Japanese imperialists was now the 'principal contradiction' (Mao, 1971, p. 110), but the underlying philosophy of the Chinese Communist Party remained the same. Similarly, Malayan Communist Party (MCP) members and sympathizers formed a united front with the PAP in the late-1950s. The following quote from John Tan (from October 2010 rather than 2009 or previous years) indicates the SDP's leadership's philosophy: 'It was when I studied about non-violent action that I thought that's the answer to our problem. The answer lies in non-violent action, civil pressure, I'm avoiding the words 'civil disobedience' as it resonates very negatively in our society' (group interview, 14 October 2010).

The SDP has begun to highlight more educated professionals with a somewhat moderate perspective such as Party Assistant Treasurer Dr Vincent Wijeyesingha, and the 35-year-old, school-teacher Ms Michelle Lee who both contested in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC. In addition to Gomez and these two new candidates, the 27 August 2011 presidential election candidate, Mr Tan Jee Say, was also an important recruiting coup for the SDP in the run-up to the 2011 GE. A former principal private-secretary for Goh Chok Tong during Goh's Deputy Prime Ministership (1985-90), Mr Tan has significant cultural and political capital within Singaporean society. He contested alongside Ang, Lee, and Wijeyesingha in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC (all four of whom were fresh candidates for the SDP) where the SDP team received a creditable 39.90% of valid votes (32,322 votes out of 81,004). All of these candidates, including Gomez as well who contested in Sembawang GRC, were generally perceived in the broader community as 'respectable' rather than 'mavericks' and none were tainted by involvement in the party during the civil disobedience era. Gomez is correct to point out that the party previously found the PAP's relentless negative campaigning as extremely unsettling and they were forced into reactive mode for many years. This has created some quite understandable negativity and cynicism, even 'hostility', on the part of the 'Old Guard' leadership, including the Chees and John Tan, towards the MSM. For this reason, it is important that the party, whilst retaining Chee as its leader, gives significant media and public exposure to its new candidates and especially to Gomez, Tan Jee Say, and Wijeyesingha. It was Wijeyesingha who was the SDP's representative on the Channel News Asia programme *A Political Forum on Singapore's Future* (2 April 2011) (MediaCorp, 2011).

Gomez and the researcher then moved on to discuss of Research Question 3, ‘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?’ Gomez hits out at GMS’s initiative of a Malay Bureau within the NSP which was designed by GMS to be a nodal point within the Party which will encourage of Malay party members to network among themselves, and to recruit Malay candidates. The Bureau clearly also indicates GMS’s boldness in recruiting Malay candidates within the context of an overall strategic goal of taking on PAP teams in GRCs. One minority race candidate is required to be a part of each contesting team. The NSP has been viewed, until very recently, as being essentially a ‘Chinese party’ and so the recruitment of non-Chinese candidates to contest under its banner has not always been easy for the party. Gomez regards the implicit ideology of the Malay Bureau as being wrong-headed and part of an old-school, sectarian politics which the PAP has historically shown itself to be adept at. By contrast, the ‘new’ politics of the rebranded SDP does not highlight racial or ethnic difference, even in the positive sense; it is instead sophisticated, globalized, multicultural, and post-modern. Although Gomez might be willing to acknowledge some potential *practical* benefits of a Malay Bureau (our conversation did not head down this path), clearly the implicit ideology behind it, although well meaning, is anathema to him. Similarly, younger SDP activists such as Jarrod Luo, and Rachel Zeng have campaigned consistently online for ‘race’ to be removed as an identification marker on Singaporean identity cards (opposed, interestingly enough, by the more socially conservative 23-year-old Alex Tan, who stood for the Reform Party in Ang Mo Kio GRC in the 2011 GE and, before that, was with the SPP Youth Wing). Gomez comment on the NSP’s Malay Bureau is that it is not in sync with a contemporary approach to politics.

In terms of Gomez’s predictions about the 2011 GE, he predicted a 1-15 percentage-point overall decline in the pro-PAP vote. The actual percentage-point swing against the PAP in contested constituencies was 6.46%-points (2011 vote 60.14%, 2006 vote 66.60%). He continued: ‘If we look at a 6% swing, and based on last elections, only Aljunied [GRC] will go in’. This is exactly what happened. He also commented that ‘Potong Pasir is fifty-fifty’, an accurate comment given that the SPP eventually lost Potong Pasir SMC by the miniscule margin of 114 votes.

### **Mr Goh Meng Seng (former Secretary-General, National Solidarity Party (NSP), 2007-11)**

GMS was an élite scholar, having passed through the Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) around the time when his fellow-traveller Gomez was also on the Kent Ridge campus. GMS’s NUS undergraduate degree was in economics, which included an honours year. Like Gomez, his father was not inclined towards the Establishment, being somewhat

influenced by the socialist ideas of the 1960s (personal interview with first-mentioned researcher, 15 October 2010, Ang Mo Kio Town Centre, Singapore). GMS goes on to indicate that a main topic of interest in his university days was the SDP rallies held in the lead up to the 91 GE. His first political rally was SDP at Potong Pasir in the 91 GE campaign. GMS says: 'I did some reports on rallies, I was involved in citizen reporting, NUS electronic bulletin boards, that was my first political activism. There was this bulletin news group which evolved into Social Culture Singapore'. This quote is significant as it shows that GMS's online activism dates back to 1991.

GMS explains further his decision to join the WP in 01: 'So through a mutual friend I was introduced to LTK. After a talk, I joined WP and never looked back. I stood in 06 in Aljunied [GRC]. I was given the task to be Mandarin anchor in 06.' With GMS's story now jumping over to 06, we see, remarkably, that his political life again parallels that of Gomez with both men being part of the 06 GE WP team to contest in Aljunied GRC. The other team members were: Sylvia Lim Swee Lian (aged 40); Tan Wui Hua (39); and Mohd Rahizan bin Yaacob (49). At this time, Gomez was aged 40 and GMS was only 36. Of this team, only Yaacob was not a first-time candidate, and only Yaacob was over 41 years old. This team, known as the 'A-team', versus the 'Suicide Squad' which took on PM Lee Hsien Loong's team in Ang Mo Kio GRC and Eric Tan's 'B-team' in East Coast GRC, reflects the resurgence of the WP under LTK with its special emphasis upon youthful, motivated, professional-type candidates. GMS comments as follows about the campaign for Aljunied GRC in the 06 GE:

"Most of the speeches [by me] were in Mandarin except for one defending James Gomez. We had a fight in Aljunied GRC; James became the lightning rod. People called him a liar, cheater, and a scheming fellow but I know the whole story. It was a mistake he made; he had not planned for it. I rebutted George Yeo [PAP team leader]. I said I will not drop James Gomez. We had quite a strong performance [43.91% or 58,593 votes out of 133,436 valid votes]".

The Marxist-Leninist philosopher Mao Zedong (1971, p. 128) once remarked that, dialectically speaking, everything morphs into its opposite. This happened with the WP in the immediate aftermath of the 06 GE as three of its youngest and most talented political candidates, Chia, GMS, and Gomez, jumped ship as a result of festering disagreements with the party leadership which could not be satisfactorily resolved. GMS argues that the WP was not able to manage effectively the massive influx of members which came into the party as a result of its very successful 06 GE campaign and so passion and enthusiasm appeared to morph dialectically into rigidity and frustration. GMS points to a tightening of party policy regarding media engagement which he implies was a result of

a nervous party leadership trying to assert its control over the operations of activists. The party did not want its CEC members to expose their identities on the internet. GMS argues that the ‘new media is quite instantaneous and interactive’ and ‘if you [the Party leadership] say you can have no blunders on new media it will not allow people to grow’. GMS points out that, while for LTK and his generation the internet is very much ‘new media’, it is not that way for GMS himself as he has been an online political activist, like Gomez, since 1991. Clearly cultural and inter-generational tension had begun to emerge within the WP in the aftermath of the 06 GE. GMS says that the Party was ‘not very responsive’ to his pushing of increased online campaigning and activism, but adds: ‘It’s understandable because we [the Party] put so much effort in rebranding the whole party. We need to be careful of slurs to party branding if people did things wrong on the net’. The extreme caution and conservatism of the WP leadership in the LTK era has generally won it praise from most sections of the electorate and the party has progressively become immune and resistant to all Government campaigns against it, campaigns which used to have other opposition groups in panic and reactive mode, including the earlier incarnation of the WP under JBJ. The negative side, or as Mao (1971) would say the dialectical opposite, of this WP cool image has been its conservatism towards online campaigning and its extreme concern not to be seen as moving ahead of the electorate in any respect at all. At a WP party conference of ordinary members, GMS asked the audience for a show of hands as to who had come to know the party through the internet. GMS comments: ‘75% to 80% put up their hands, I made my point’. As a result of a lack of party support for online campaigning, GMS resigned from the WP. GMS is willing to say a lot more than Gomez about why he left WP and one wonders whether the reasons and reasoning offered by GMS also apply for Gomez. GMS explains:

“Official reason [for my resignation] is I took responsibility for the bad press, slur on the party brand. I felt if I was to stay in the party it would be too restrictive for my personal growth. For those [still] inside it [this approach] will do them no good in the long run. It’s just like a child. If you don’t want him to fall you prevent him from walking. It’s not logical. I felt aspiring politicians will not have a good training ground if they stay in the party”.

Chia Ti Lik comments as follows about why he left the WP: ‘I left WP because of their controls on expression on the internet’ (personal Facebook communication with the first-mentioned researcher, 15 December 2010). This is, of course, the same reason given by GMS.

GMS moves on now to discuss his NSP period which began in 2007. His dilemma on leaving the WP was whether to ‘start a new party or join an existing one’. He was approached to join the NSP by the NSP’s President Mr

## Sebastian Teo. GMS says:

“He [Teo]’s more active in media engagement [compared to WP]. He showed me the vision; he wanted to revamp the party, to become a key player in the opposition field. He asked me to join. I thought ‘why not?’ The NSP already has an infrastructure; I should see how I could contribute to building”.

It is little wonder that Teo had a vision to revamp the NSP around this time, probably sensing a renewed community interest in the opposition and having observed the WP’s then very rapid and successful rebirth. However, GMS experienced a ‘cultural shock’ when he joined the NSP as they had nowhere near the level of support and community recognition as his former party. GMS also acknowledges that LTK was a ‘very good mentor’ and the three ex-WP people mentioned in this paper no doubt grew, developed, and stabilized as politicians and as people during their time under LTK although ultimately all three decided to part company with the WP. GMS says about LTK: ‘He cautions us about such circumstances [being provoked or put under stress], you must be cool and calm in your analysis, and you must avoid being flattered’.

In the end, GMS was offered the NSP Secretary-Generalship although he fails to mention exactly how this came about. GMS makes the direct and somewhat unexpected comment that ‘[t]here are no core values’ at the NSP, i.e. at the time he joined. He adds, speaking in the present tense as he was still Secretary-General at the date of our interview, 15 October 2010: ‘My job after taking over is to reconstruct branding for NSP’. He points out, very accurately, that the NSP has been a party with much potential, it has had its successes (most notably a strong showing in Hong Kah GRC under Dr Wong Wee Nam in the 97 GE, and Steve Chia serving as NCMP from 01-06), but it has failed to capitalize on periods of public interest, and few voters in 07 really understood exactly what the Party stood for.

Clearly Teo was giving GMS a huge challenge and, looking back and despite hostility and doubt from his many critics, the present authors argue that GMS performed well and secured a rejuvenation of the party (if not actually a rebranding) during the three years of his Secretary-Generalship. He unearthed and attracted strong talent including Tony Tan Lay Thiam (not to be confused with the PAP’s Tony Tan Keng Yam), Hazel Poa, and the youthful and popular Seah. Regarding the May 2011 GE, it can always be argued, with the benefit of hindsight, that GMS put the wrong teams into the wrong constituencies, and never clearly defined the party policies. However, contrary to such assertions, GMS chose to focus policy on housing issues. He moved the party into a more humanitarian direction (and thus closer to the SDP), and he backed up his special emphasis upon housing and HDB issues by taking head on the then Minister for National Development, Mr Mah Bow Tan, in Tampines GRC.

The fact that Mah no longer serves in this position is one measure of GMS's achievement as well as the fact that the 11.29%-point swing against Mah's team in Tampines GRC nearly doubled the national percentage swing of 6.46%-points against the PAP. As Chan (2011) points out, Mah's team scored 57.21%, three percentage-points below the PAP's national average. Chan (2011) comments: 'By his own standard, it is a blow' as Mah had previously said, in a *Straits Times* interview, that he had hoped to score above the national average. Perhaps the NSP's best team should have been put into Tampines GRC, including two or three of the party's strongest Chinese candidates Steve Chia, Hazel Poa, Nicole Seah, and/or Tony Tan.

One of GMS's major initiatives, at least according to his own interpretation of events, is the NSP's setting up of its Malay Bureau. GMS explains his reasoning here behind this controversial decision, one opposed by both Gomez and Patrick Lee:

"I wanted to start up one in WP. PAP says 'no racial politics' but they play the race card all the time. They want to portray themselves as the only political party who can take care of all the races. They guard this jealously. They will attack people as Chinese [Tang Liang Hong, 97] or Malay chauvinist [Jufrie Mahmood, Eunus GRC, 91]. They refuse to acknowledge that other parties can be guardians of other races. This is something I have to address if I want the party to be a serious contender for the future. To me, I'm not playing the race card. I'm a Mandarin anchor. But my party must take care of Malays and Indians. We are multiracial. ... I've a multiracial outlook, challenging bases of PAP".

Interestingly, GMS sees the Malay Bureau as a strategy to claim some of the ground from the PAP in relation to being seen as thought-leaders of the all-inclusive, multiracial approach. He sees it as multiracialism and forward-looking whereas Gomez sees it as a part of old-school, ethnic politics not suitable for the post-globalization era. Clearly it is all a matter of interpretation. The Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA)'s Patrick Lee Song Juan worries that GMS has opened himself up for a smear campaign by essentially taking on the PAP in one of its traditional areas of strength and hegemony and (Patrick) Lee has labelled the Malays attracted to the Malay Bureau as 'Malay trash' or second-rate candidates (Patrick Lee, personal interview, 12 October 2010, Singapore). As far back as the 1950s and 1960s, both Malay and Chinese-educated PAP politicians, such as Ahmad Ibrahim, Othman Wok, Yaacob Mohamed, Rahim Ishak, Ong Pang Boon, Lee Khoo Choy, Jek Yeun Thong, were stressing the multiracialism of the PAP (Ibrahim, 1999; Sai and Huang, 1999). This was in the context of the creation of a *Malaysian Malaya* (Kwok, 1999, p. 56; Sai and Huang, 1999, p. 150) (versus the United Malays National

Organisation or UMNO's concept of a *Malay Malaya* (Sai and Huang, 1999, p. 150)). However, the discourse changed, in the 1970s and 1980s, to the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) model (Sai and Huang, 1999, p. 160-1) which reverts back to an emphasis on the preservation of the three or four traditional cultures (Sai and Huang, 1999, p. 155) in the face of the importation of decadent, Western cultural values which are a by-product of industrialization (Doshi and Coclanis, 1999, p. 39; Sai and Huang, 1999, pp. 153, 155; Stivens, 2007, p. 38). The PAP plays the race-card by defining and re-defining the boundary-markers of what are and what are not acceptable references to culture and ethnicity in the public realm (Sai and Huang, 1999, pp. 136, 146, 154). One important assumption of the PAP is that cultural discussions are only acceptable if thoroughly depoliticized (Sai and Huang, 1999, pp. 154, 157), and this is the reason why Patrick Lee might be concerned about the Malay Bureau opening the NSP up to allegations. However, as a Mandarin anchor promoting Malay and Indian causes, GMS has neatly sidestepped any potential allegations because he is not promoting the language and cultural aspirations of his own race ahead of the similar aspirations of other races. Whilst the word 'guardians' in the above GMS quote might seem to some condescending, GMS clearly has no intentions in this regard and is well meaning. He is working from the position of the NSP traditionally being perceived as a 'Chinese Party' and the Malay and Indian Bureaus have to be seen against this unique backdrop. GMS sets out some recent political history, noting that the PAP has always been concerned with how it is perceived by each ethnic community and how it will work strategically and proactively to repair what is perceived as a temporarily weakened relationship with any particular ethnic group. For example, after the 'Marxist conspiracy' case<sup>6</sup> of 1987-88, the PAP put in major efforts to win back the Roman Catholic vote with George Yeo being used as the PAP's main Catholic ambassador to the Catholics. After the PAP's campaign against Jufrie Mahmood, the pro-PAP Malay vote suffered adversely. (GMS argues that LTK's win in Hougang SMC in 91 was probably assisted by a Malay swing towards him as a 'spillover effect' from neighbouring Eunos GRC.) Because of this, the PAP made a major strategic effort to strengthen its Malay support through various policies such as the establishment of the Malay/Muslim community self-help group Mendaki. This led to a swing towards the PAP by Malay voters in 97 and 01 before being counterbalanced by a slight swing back to the opposition in 06.

GMS argues that 'Malays are more impacted by group leadership' than the Chinese, for example, through informal and unregulated Muslim 'cell groups', and so the Malay community vote swings faster and more strongly than does the Chinese vote. He speaks as follows about the NSP's Malay Bureau, now moving on from the contestable logic and ideology behind it to how it has developed in practical terms:

6 Barr (2008) and Seow (1994) provide introductions to the 'Marxist conspiracy' case.



“I have to correct this [PAP supporters putting pressure on Malays not to contest for the opposition]. I will invite people in the community. My Malay network has established community connections. The number of Malay activists we have is still growing, ten to twenty [at date of interview, 15 October 2010]. Some are committed to stand for election, I have a political science graduate working for an MNC who will stand, and one lady active in social community work. They will compile issues pertaining to the community and they will attract professionals from the Malay community to join [NSP]. Patrick is totally mistaken about ‘Malay trash’. [Coincidentally Patrick telephoned GMS in the middle of our lunchtime interview in a Malaysian restaurant in Ang Mo Kio Town Centre.]”

In addressing Research Question 5, ‘What do the opposition parties need to do to go from 25% to 50.1% and what type of people makes up that next 25% that the opposition must win over?’ GMS makes additional comments about the Malay Bureau which fits into his (then) long-term strategic goal of, within fifteen years, forming a coalition government with the PAP within a ‘hung parliament’.

## **Conclusion**

When WP supporters cheered the victory in Aljunied GRC in May 2011 they were not only cheering a present victory but a ‘retroactive redemption of the past’ (Žižek, 2008, pp. 81-2) whereby the present victory is seen as giving power and credence to certain people’s past efforts (dating back to the 1950s) as well as the interpretations of those efforts ‘Aljunied’ was a symbol of the wishes of non-PAP supporters that their memories, perceptions, and experiences be given equal respect and reverence within the national discourse of self-imaging. Interestingly, George Yeo lost his seat through the Aljunied victory and Yeo has been the PAP’s chief ideologue in recent times (Hong and Huang, 2008, p. 191). The rejuvenation of the NSP and the rebranding of the SDP must also be seen in this light. For non-PAP supporters, the rejuvenated opposition provides them a new and more palatable way of viewing themselves and the world, as well as possible paths through it, past, present, and future. If the spectre of Lim Chin Siong lives on today it is in Hougang and Aljunied.

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