

# PostScript

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**AGAINST ALL ODDS**



Together, we will  
emerge stronger.

Do not lose heart,  
stay safe.

PHOTOGRAPHY: *beggs*

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The Editorial Board of *Post Script* promises to deliver well-produced content and adhere to responsible publication practices, such as remaining largely unbiased and representing diverse viewpoints. We strongly hope that this will contribute to inclusive political discourse and vibrant civic engagement within the NUS community.



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# EDITOR'S NOTE

*Post Script* is the semesterly student publication of the NUS Political Science Society (PSSOC), providing insightful commentary on current affairs, within and beyond Singapore. It is named after the occasional afterthought found at the end of written letters (P.S.), which comes from the Latin expression *post scriptum*, meaning "written after".

## Dear Reader,

As many have wearily expressed, 2020 had been a tumultuous year unlike any other and a despairing prelude to the new decade. While the whole world was struggling to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, here in Singapore, we also faced our own share of hurdles. We found ourselves trying to stay updated with countless directives from the Multi-Ministry Taskforce, holding the 18th General Elections amidst a prolonged crisis and frequently dipping into the national reserves to sustain our economy. Suffice to say, 2020 was very overwhelming.

However, in times of crisis, opportunities always present themselves. Just as everyone was adapting to the 'new normal', the PSSOC Publications Directorate decided it was timely to re-examine our practices and efforts. Hence, we undertook a major restructuring and rebranding exercise to keep up with our ever-changing world.

## PSSOC Publication's Restructuring & Rebranding

Breaking away from past conventions, the 1st Editorial Board was formally established, thereby having a dedicated and inclusive team that can focus on delivering quality publications for you, our esteemed readers. Moreover, we value your diverse opinions and strongly believe in having the voices of our communities be heard! Besides from our in-house Editors, we welcomed Community Contributors to come forward with their novel submissions.

***"We did not feel prepared to be heirs of such a terrifying hour, but within it we found the power to author a new chapter."***

Amanda Gorman,  
*The Hill We Climb*

Internally, we streamlined our workflow through a reformed Editorial Process and drafted our Editorial Style Guide and Code of Ethics, committing ourselves to editorial standards. We even adopted new media tools, such as our new Instagram (@pssoc\_pubs) and the online publishing platform, Issuu, to remain relevant within the digital world. Lastly, we consolidated our existing set of publications. Although *Voices* was discontinued, we revitalised *Political Pulse* into a better, semesterly publication and took on a new brand - *Post Script*.

As such, what you are currently reading is the culmination of our work-from-home efforts over the past semester and the long-awaited debut of *Post Script*.

## Post Script #01: Against All Odds

In the face of unfathomable challenges, we managed to emerge from 2020 mostly intact. Despite the ongoing pandemic crisis and state-mandated physical separation, various groups had risen up and fought for critical social issues, from minority rights to mental health. Even if we may be 1-2 metres apart from one another, we have grown closer than ever before, united around ideas and principles that matter to us. Now in 2021, we are in a new era of social movements and an evolving, vibrant political landscape.

Through these troubling times, we survived and are redefining ourselves, inspiring us to set this issue's theme as 'Against All Odds'.

Our Editors dived into various topics that embody the rekindling of hope and defiance, no matter how dark things may seem. Firstly, Sumana's interviews share the honest thoughts of Burmese youth, who are studying in Singapore, regarding the recent military *coup d'état* and growing Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar. Spurred on by the Government's ongoing review of women's issues, Chloe tracks the political struggles of Singapore women throughout our independence, working towards the larger goal of gender equality.

Moving into the social media space and guided by her CNM studies, Wien unpacks the global phenomena of fan activism and its considerable influence in political participation and media representation. Jeanell similarly navigates the shifting political landscape in Singapore, transformed by politicians' social media presence and the youth vote, after being intrigued by Hypebeast *Ah Gong's* virality in GE2020.

We are then brought back to COVID-19, with Gavin comparing the differing responses of various nations and examines how this impacts government legitimacy. Though we may be hopeful of the many COVID-19 vaccines available to us, Isabella questions whether it truly means an end to this pandemic, and what exactly is the hold-up?

Last but not least, we hear from our Community Contributor, Jia Yi, who offers robust arguments for greater female political empowerment and involvement in society, thereby countering traditional gendered norms.

Of course, if not for the ingenuity and vision of the Creative Editors, these articles would look very similar to the essays we regularly submit for our university assignments.

Through the combined efforts of Audrey, Celeste and Xiyi, they breathed life into every page of this publication, for an enjoyable reading experience and hopefully inspiring you too!

### **Closing Words**

We are profoundly grateful for the efforts of our Editorial Team in coming up with a repertoire of intriguing articles, driven by their varied interests and passion for writing; as well as our Creative Team for beautifully designing the publication you see before you, running our social media, and bestowing upon *Post Script* its unique identity. Thank you for tirelessly working together and creating something we can truly be proud of.

We would like to deeply thank both the NUS Political Science Department and PSSOC for their continued support in making *Post Script* possible. Our heartfelt thanks also go to Associate Professor William Bain for kindly setting aside his time and contributing to the Professor Interview article.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, thank you, our dear reader, for supporting the maiden issue of *Post Script*! We sincerely hope you will enjoy this issue and stay curious about the world around us. As echoed by our past Editors-in-Chief, we do not claim to hold all the answers, so we implore you to read deeper into the topics that pique your interest.



**Didi Amzar & Lim Nicole**  
Editors-in-Chief of *Post Script*

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An Interview With  
Associate Professor  
**WILLIAM BAIN**



# Q & A

## About Assoc. Prof. William Bain

Dr. William Bain is an Associate Professor at the NUS Department of Political Science. He received the FASS Faculty Teaching Excellence Award in 2016, 2018 and 2019, as well as the Annual Teaching Excellence Award in 2017 and 2019. Prior to joining NUS, he held appointments at Glasgow University, Aberystwyth University and as Visiting Professor at Université Libre de Bruxelles. He obtained his BA from the University of South Carolina and his MA and PhD from the University of British Columbia.<sup>1</sup>

Prof. Bain currently teaches modules such as PS1101E: *Introduction to Politics*, PS3311: *International Ethics*, and PS4211: *Political Theology*, demonstrating his active interests within the areas of international relations, international political theory, and the history of political thought. He is particularly interested in exploring the way in which religion shapes the theory of international relations and has recently authored *Political Theology of International Order*,<sup>2</sup> along with other numerous articles and book chapters, as well as serving as an Editor-in-Chief of *International Relations*.<sup>3</sup>

To most NUS Political Science students, we would know of Prof. Bain from his classes on international relations. As of late, he is fondly known for using his own landscape photography shots for his Zoom backgrounds, sharing educational Facts-of-the-Week from his beloved daughter and catching up with students on the latest football matches. Our Editor-in-Chief, **Didi Amzar**, recently interviewed him to find out more about the man beyond the classroom.

## Personal Journey in Political Science

Didi **Becoming a Professor and going into academia is quite a niche field. How did you become a Professor of Political Science (PS) and how has the journey been for you?**

Prof Oh boy, that's quite the question! It wasn't until I was an undergraduate, in my third year I believe, when I had that defining moment where I thought that "Maybe being an academic is what I should do?".

It occurred when I was being interviewed for a summer internship. So, I sat down with the interviewer and he asked me a few questions about my thoughts on world affairs and so forth. It quickly became apparent to me that he kept referencing the way *they* write, the way *they* do this and that. I grew quite concerned that there'd be very little independence for my own thoughts and ideas, as opposed to processing ideas for other people instead.

That's when I first pondered that perhaps becoming a Professor was for me. One of the rewards of becoming an academic is that, within certain boundaries and limits, I'm able to study the questions that motivate me. I was very much attracted to the idea of having freedom in exploring the questions I set for myself, rather than having them set for me, and figured that being an academic was my path forward.

From there, it was a matter of getting through graduate school, starting with my Master's and then PhD. Then there was the other matter of working out for myself what it is that I'm exactly interested in, and that's a different story.

One of the most interesting things for many academics is that they often start graduate school, interested in one topic/area, and then they end up finishing but being interested in something completely different. I would fall into that category; I had a very significant transformation in graduate school that shifted my interests.

## Didi **How did you exactly transform moving from graduate school and then beyond?**

Prof First off, as an undergrad, I was interested in what we used to refer to as '*national security*', which is presently known as '*security studies*', broadly construed. You've to remember that when I was an undergrad, we're talking about the 1980s amidst the Cold War. So, the sort of things that a typical undergrad was taught back then is very much unlike what is taught today. For example, nuclear deterrence was one of the key issues, nuclear proliferation was something that we all studied and that this was all part of basic international relations (IR). Of course, the Cold War, that struggle between the US, USSR and their various blocs, pretty much framed everything we learnt. So-called '*high politics*', security, bombs, guns, it all dominated the study of the subject.

Later on, I started graduate school at UBC in 1994. Lots of things changed quite dramatically from the late '80s into 1994, most obviously, the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union. The 1990s, to me, was a particularly fascinating and rewarding time to study politics and IR, largely because that Cold War framing grew increasingly irrelevant. All of a sudden, there were opportunities to ask totally different questions in the 1990s. For instance, there was this idea that IR arguably wasn't narrowly about security, the balance of power, nuclear weapons, material power etc., but that the understanding of power was more diffused and that there were different elements. Academics began to question the distinction between '*high-low politics*'. *High politics* being statecraft. military power and

material power; while *low politics* were institutions, economics and the like. As such, there was a comprehensive rethinking of what security meant and what it meant to be secure.

Then in my own case, my personal transformation' happened in graduate school where I took a seminar called *International Ethics* and this was really quite different, something that really wasn't even on the radar in the 1980s. Again, we were taught as undergrads that security is about military power and interests, with ethics not really being significant within IR. I had enrolled in this particular seminar, partly because there was nothing else for me to take that semester that fit my timetable, right? That's something students will surely be familiar with, so I found myself in a similar spot as a Masters student at that time.

Truth be told, I went into this seminar *profoundly skeptical* of its entire premise, the idea of 'international ethics'. But about four weeks in, I had this total revelation: not only have I been missing half of the subject, but I had been missing the more important half (in my opinion). I believe what was significant in that moment, by being exposed to a different literature in the seminar, is my realisation that you could be a 'hard-nosed' realist, who's interested in both power/material and ethics too. To me, that revelation exploded the idea that IR was all about power, etc. and that ethics was just this 'soft', idealist, wishy-washy, unserious approach towards IR. As it happens, I then discovered that classical realists, such as Hans Morgenthau,

Arnold Wolfers and Reinhold Niebuhr, and their writings were imbued with ethical content and an ethical orientation.

I had totally misunderstood the subject and this seminar set me on a completely new direction, where I began working on normative theory, another theme that emerged in the 1990s. It's now referred to as 'international political theory' or 'international ethics' in the US. Normative theory brought me into contact with political theory (PT), and so for the first time in my education, I began to read PT as primary texts. The rest is history.

In short — and to convey the scale of that transformation — I started graduate school being intrigued by 'national security' and nuclear weapons. I wrote my Master's thesis on nuclear proliferation in South Asia and the impact it would have on regional security.<sup>4</sup> However, by the time I had finished it, my worldview on the subject had totally changed to something else entirely.

Didi **What has been your most memorable moment thus far as a Professor/lecturer?**

Prof Well, I don't think there's just one memorable moment, rather there are several and they're all related to working with students. I really love teaching, in interacting with students and I take a great deal of satisfaction in watching students grow, achieve and the like. So for me, that's where the real rewards are, being in a lecture or seminar, which of course is much more difficult now, given online teaching. When you're in a classroom and you see students' faces light up with what I describe as that "A-ha!" moment, I find that extremely rewarding. When I see students question their assumptions and beliefs, that motivates me; and when they think about the world differently than they did before. I've more than 20 years of teaching experience and for me these are still the most rewarding moments.

I don't think students realise how much I learn from them. I've learned a tremendous amount from my students. I'm not just talking about graduate or even honour students, but first year students as well; I'm constantly learning from them. If you were to look at the acknowledgments to my recently published book,<sup>5</sup> you'll come across a reference to the honour seminars that I've taught. That was where I was able to try out arguments on my students — to test them out. Sometimes those sort of naive questions or ones prefaced by a student saying, "*Prof, I probably got it all wrong here*", are often the ones that are quite illuminating for me.

So, I believe that a rewarding teaching and learning experience goes two ways. It's not only seeing students have that "A-ha!" moment, working hard, achieving a good essay grade or coming out of a module thinking, "Wow, that module really changed me". The rewards relate also to what I learn from students. Whenever I find myself going, OK, I'm explaining this idea or argument, but they don't quite understand it, it must be that I'm not being very clear about it. But, you asked for a specific moment right?

One moment comes to mind, when I was a PhD student. I was assigned as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for POLI 100: *Introduction to Politics* at UBC, the equivalent of PS1101E in FASS. One of the module requirements was that each student had to give a presentation on a topic in the tutorial and so in the very first session, I let the students choose the topic that they wanted to do.

In one tutorial group I had a mature student — I was about 30 at the time and he was probably in his 40s. He was a First Nations person, one of the Canadian indigenous peoples, from Saskatchewan. He chose the topic of ‘Indigenous Rights’ and I initially thought that perhaps I should ask him to do something else to get beyond his comfort zone. In the end, I didn’t and this proved to be one of the most formative experiences in my career. It’s a moment that I remember quite vividly.

So, when I introduced the topic and said, “*Right, the floor is yours, Roy (the student)*”, he began his presentation, speaking not in English, but rather in his Aboriginal language. At first I thought, OK this is interesting, but he went on and on and on, for a really long time. I estimate that he probably went on for about 3 or 4 minutes — which is an eternity in the circumstances.

Didi **I-in a tutorial presentation?**

Prof Exactly, in a presentation. The tutorial group — myself included — had no idea what he's saying and he eventually stopped speaking, pausing before saying: “*For First Nations, that's what it's like when Canada speaks to us*”. Right there, I mean, that was just an incredible and formative moment for me. It was then that I learned what is probably the most important aspect of teaching: remembering to listen. Listen to your students and listen to people around you.

I've never forgotten that moment, I can remember it just like it was yesterday. It was one of those moments that I really learned something crucial from one of my students. Ever since, I've always maintained the attitude that “*I remain a student of the subject, just like my students are*”. Yes, it's true that I'm further along than my students are, but I still have things to learn from them. That's one of the reasons why I love being in the classroom

# Blessings & Curses of Online Teaching in COVID-19

Didi Due to COVID-19, universities across the world have had to switch to online learning formats, NUS included, as you alluded to earlier. As an educator, how has that experience been like for you? What do you miss the most from having face-to-face classes?

Prof To be candid, it's been a less-than-ideal experience, for me and for the students. That said, we live in the world that we live in and I'm not suggesting that we throw caution to the wind. It's not an ideal situation but we need to take the precautions for the sake of everybody's health and safety. Unfortunately, that's what makes online teaching really frustrating; it's not ideal but we have to do it for good reasons.

It's just not the same however. Online teaching reminds us just how important human interaction and body language is. In the case of teaching a large module, like PS1101E, I can't see everybody's face on my screen simultaneously as I'm teaching. I find that really frustrating because in a lecture theatre — believe it or not — I can see more than most students realise. I can tell how the lecture is going because I can see the body language and the faces, which helps me to pace things correctly. I'm able to adjust if I see students looking confused. That sends me a clear signal: it's time to pause, back up and clarify the point I'm trying to make. This is a lot more difficult in an online format, because I don't see the same body language. Worse, many students in large modules don't turn their cameras on, so I see nothing but a black tile.

So yes, online teaching is definitely not ideal, especially for somebody like me who genuinely loves being in the classroom. I really miss the give-and-take of a classroom setting, which is very difficult to replicate, if it's possible at all online. In smaller groups, I find it more challenging to generate a conversation, akin to an in-person one where everybody can see each other. This facilitates responses, not only to me, but between classmates as well. The conversation on Zoom is much slower and less spontaneous, especially with having to raise electronic hands and muting-unmuting that hinders the momentum of the discussion. The ideal conversation in a seminar or tutorial is one that bounces around; I say something, a student responds, and then one of your classmates counters with, *“Actually, I disagree with what person A just said, and I'd like to make point X”*.

It's my hope that we can get back to normal teaching, sooner rather than later. Though at the same time, I've taken steps to compensate for the limitations of online teaching. I find that human interaction is extremely important, especially for first-year students who are new to university. So, for instance in PS1101E, the tutorials centred on a group project component, which required students to be in groups and work together. The aim was to get students to interact with their classmates and not just sit alone in a hostel or at home. Additionally, I instituted the informal 'Lunch with Prof' meetings on Fridays, which I think were well-received. To me, it's important to get to know my students; I don't want them to be anonymous. Not only does everybody have something to contribute, but everybody has different interests and needs. By getting to know students on a personal basis, I'm able to work these things out. You might be interested in one thing and somebody else might be interested in something else. Getting to know my students helps me to support these different interests.

Overall, online teaching presents a number of significant challenges and yet, being committed to teaching, I tried my best to mitigate some of its limitations. Still, in the end, I'm not convinced that online teaching is ever going to be as good as in-person teaching.

**Didi As a student, I'll definitely agree that online learning is not the best experience, but given the circumstances, we've got to do what we have to.**

**Maybe to cheer you up Prof, I can share that some of my closest friends in NUS are from my PS1101E group project, since they're one of the first people I've ever met in university. I'm sure others from that module can also attest to something similar!**

Prof That's fantastic and I'm really, really pleased to hear that; it validates why I did what I did. You only get to go to university once as a young person, and it's important to make the most of the experience. Everybody isn't going to travel the same path; different students want to do different things, and that's all fine. My role as a teacher is to guide students so that they can travel their own self-chosen path. Going to university is one of those occasions where you can do and think about something different or challenge what is take-for-granted.

It's important to temper the criticisms of online teaching. First of all, speaking for myself and my colleagues, we put in tremendous effort into making online teaching as good as it can be. Students should be reassured and know that efforts are being made to put on excellent teaching. In fact, online teaching actually entails more work than in-person teaching.

We should also bear in mind, as we complain about online teaching, that the various restrictions are there for good reason. If anybody has any doubts on why we have them, all we have to do is look at other nations like the US, India or Brazil, where the pandemic has hit very hard. In contrast, we've been extraordinarily fortunate here in Singapore, where the pandemic has been handled really well. Yeah, it's been inconvenient, and I'd love to see the back of online teaching as soon as possible, but as I often explain to friends and colleagues abroad, we're able to live a quasi-normal life because of these restrictions.

Indeed, I've been a bit despondent over the last couple of weeks, because we've reverted back to Phase Two and it's likely that I'll be teaching PS1101E online next semester. If so, that will come as a huge disappointment as I was really looking forward to being in a lecture theatre to teach that class. So yes, I'm going to complain, gripe and moan about it, but I'm also sensible enough to recognise that we're doing the things the way we've been doing it for reasons that keep us safe.

**Didi If I'm not mistaken, last semester (AY20/21 Sem 1) was the first time that you've helmed PS1101E: *Introduction to Politics* and will be doing so again this coming semester (AY21/22 Sem 1).**

**Could you share with us why you decided to do so, especially given the fact that you've taught 3000, 4000 and even 6000-level PS modules in the past?**

Prof Well, that's because my Head of Department asked me to do it! (*laughs*) On a serious note, with large modules, like PS1101E and PS2237: *Intro to IR*, it's fair that everyone takes a turn and my turn came up. That's why I can't say that I chose to teach PS1101E, but I did choose to teach it again next semester.

That was a conscious choice on my part because I actually enjoyed teaching PS1101E for a couple of reasons. First off, when I was asked to teach this, I thought, "OK, wow. How am I going to do this?" The first requirement that I set for myself was that the module had to be relevant for Singaporean students, which I felt was critically important. This meant that I had to teach it differently than how I would teach *Introduction to Politics* in Canada (where I did my PhD and was a TA). For example, it's common for an introduction to politics course, in say North America or Western Europe, to have a lecture on political parties and how our political party system works.

I decided not to do that for PS1101E. Why? Well, because Singapore does not have the same kind of party system because one party always wins. So PS1101E had to be relevant in a Singaporean context, rather than being based on abstract ideas taken out of context. While the module does explore abstract ideas quite a bit, the question is how did I do that? I began the lecture with a problem, with many of them set in a Singapore context. I wanted to have a lot of Singapore content in it, without reducing PS1101E to Singapore politics.



My aim was to begin with a tangible problem — freedom, limits on speech etc. — and then show how that problem can be analysed and explored in different ways.

I didn't invent this approach for PS1101E (I do something similar in PS3311), but wanted to use real-world problems to explore vocabulary of politics: freedom, equality, responsibility, the nation, and so forth. To me, that was a way of reaching out to students and relating 'dry' material to their everyday lives. This involves more than a structured reading of the newspaper. Rather, I wanted to teach students to think systematically about political problems — that is, to learn how to read the newspaper. We explored the distinction between positive-negative liberty and different ways of understanding the nation. Singapore is a young country, which is still self-consciously engaged in nation-building. Therefore, it seems pertinent then to ask questions such as, "What is the nation?" or "What exactly are we building here?", to better understand ourselves.

The other rewarding aspect of teaching PS1101E is that I learned an incredible amount about Singapore, since I'm no Singapore politics specialist by any stretch of the imagination. Yet in order to make this class relevant to Singaporean students, I embarked on a crash course of Singapore politics and society. Here again we are reminded that teaching and learning is a two-way street.

I also didn't want to be constrained by artificial academic boundaries because politics cuts across such boundaries. Some students might be interested in PT and others in Comparative Politics (CP) and/or IR. I find thinking in terms of sub-fields to be quite limiting and, in some ways, counter-productive. In that respect, I wanted to introduce students to the vocabulary of politics.

In the end, I truly enjoyed teaching PS1101E and I only hope that students got something out of it in return. There is evidence of success, but my attitude towards teaching is that it can always be better, so I'm always looking to improve my teaching. I've even already begun giving thought on how to change PS1101E and I'm planning some pretty significant changes, mainly in the readings, in preparation for next semester.

# Onset of Political Awareness & Interest

Didi As PS majors, we're often assumed to be desiring to enter local politics/civil service or are obsessed with current affairs, by those who are not familiar with the field. We might even get questioned over why we chose this line as our degree. So, when and why did you decide that PS was the path for you as an undergraduate?

Prof Well, I can't say that I actually made a self-conscious decision on that. For some reason, I was sort of politically aware and politically-interested for as long as I can remember. One question I often ask people is, "*What was the first world event of which you were politically aware?*"

Here I'm going to date myself and risk disclosing just how old I am. I can remember as a young boy, less than 10 years old, watching the fall of Saigon in 1975 on television. I can even remember once in kindergarten or Grade 1, maybe when I was 5 to 6 years old, our teacher asked each student to take a pushpin and place it on a massive world map on the wall. The student's 'country' would be where the pin landed and that would be a focus of their learning. When it was my turn, the teacher handed me the pin and I said to her, "*Which one's Vietnam?*". She showed me on the map and that's where I put my pin.

I have to attribute a lot of this to my mother, who was very much interested in current affairs. The news was always on television and my mother was an avid reader of the newspaper and news magazines. I'm sure I picked that up from her. So, I can't say that I made a self-conscious choice, I've just been interested in it for as long as I can remember.

## Beyond Academia & University

Didi Aside from being a PS lecturer and academia, what do you like to do for fun in your spare time? We've heard that you're quite an avid fan of football and photography!

Prof Yes, you've named the two main activities for me. Of course, these things change over the years. I've been interested in different things in different places over the years. When I lived in Vancouver, Canada, I was an obsessive snowboarder, especially since I lived close to one of the best ski mountains in North America. Since moving to Singapore, I've been really interested in photography. I like sharing my photographs with my students by using them as my Zoom background instead of displaying my messy home study. It's also a way of sharing my interests with students as well, since I do like to take an interest in them too.

I understand that my students have their own lives and interests, and over the years I've learned things about them that are really fascinating! For example, a few years ago I had a student who was involved in NUS Indian Dance and she gave me a ticket for their annual performance. Now I didn't know anything about Indian dance, nor have any idea that she was involved in it until she offered me that ticket. I went to the performance with my wife and it was just superb! I was so impressed and so glad to know that about my student. I think it's important to take an interest in my students and that goes both ways, so I share a little bit about myself with them. I don't want my students to think that I'm a distant or aloof Prof who isn't kind of really human and all of that - I have my own interests, fears and failures. I'm no different in that way!

You might wonder, why do I do this? Some profs might have the idea of (sigh), "My module is the most important and that should be the center of your life." That's definitely not my approach; I realise that students have a life beyond my module and some might be in it because they have to be or because it fits their timetable. Other students might genuinely love the module, which is obviously gratifying. For me, there's room for everyone. Taking an interest in my students and reciprocating that interest builds trust. So whenever I tell my students, "Yeah, this is difficult, but keep at it. Keep working at it. It will come good", establishing trust makes for a better learning experience and encourages perseverance.

Going back, yes, I spent a lot of time with my photography. Well, more accurately, not as much time as I'd like to, since photography is very time-consuming. I dabble in different types of photography, such as landscape photography. Of course, Singapore is limited in that way because it is so small, so what do I do then? I end up taking the same scenes that everybody else does in Singapore (*laughs*), so I've got Marina Bay, East Coast Park and the scenes that everyone else does. Recently I've been doing macro photography recently, like snapping insects really up close.

I'm also really interested in football. I watch my team, typically very early in the morning, before starting work. I watch a fair bit of football in part because my son is an accomplished footballer himself. So I'm always quite happy to talk about football, although I never reveal my team to my students.

Didi **Aiyah, I've been wanting to ask that but okay, I don't think I'll be getting it in here then! (laughs)**

Prof (laughs) Yeah no, not at all, I never reveal my team because I don't want anybody to think I'm being biased against them! Oh, Prof gave me a C+ and it's because I supported a different team from him!

I've started playing cricket again. Cricket was my main sport when I lived in the UK. After moving to Singapore I had intended to continue playing cricket but I couldn't because I was diagnosed with cancer about a year after arriving. Cancer treatment and the long recovery period put an end to my cricket career, at least for a time. Fortunately, circumstances have conspired in such a way that I've started playing cricket again in the last few months. No matches yet, due to COVID-19 regulations and the like, but I am enjoying playing cricket again! So, those are my hobbies.

## A/P Bain's Latest Book

Didi **Last year, you've authored a book titled, *Political Theology of International Order*. Could you briefly share with us more about the book and why you decided to write it?**

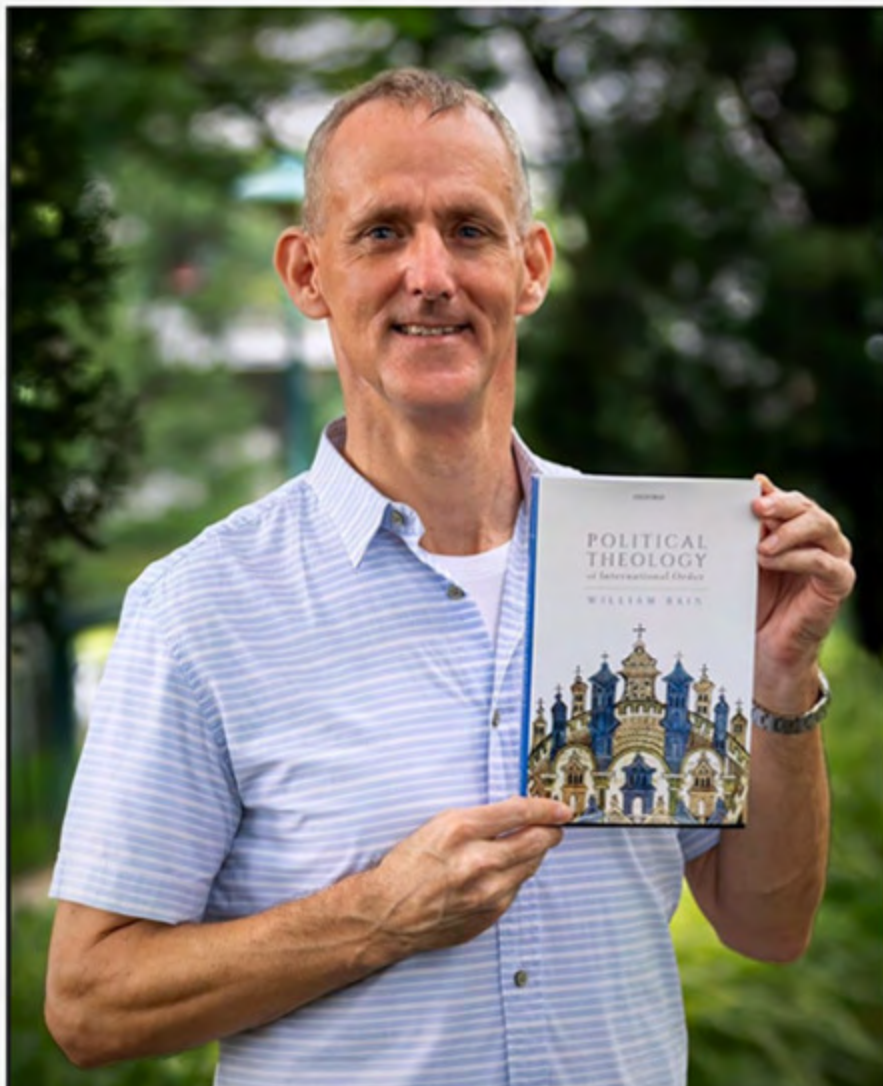
Prof Right, the overarching argument of the book is that predominant ways in which we think about international order are founded on ideas that originate in medieval theology. Thus realist, liberal, and English School understandings of order are expressions of a theological worldview which emerged out of a

medieval dispute about the nature of God and the extent of his power. I spend 9 chapters presenting and developing that argument.

Now how did I get into this? This is a really, really interesting story for me, which has two sides to it. Back in the mid-2000s or so, I was on holiday in Vancouver and I found myself in a used bookshop and purchased a copy of Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves' book, *The Medieval Contribution to Political Thought*.<sup>6</sup>

I paid something like \$2.95 or so for it and as I began reading the book I realised that my understanding of the Middle Ages was wrong. Everything! When talking about the Middle Ages, usually it's religious fanaticism, it's backward, it's cruel, it's violent. It's all of these things. After reading these lectures I realised that the 'backward and cruel' narrative was a caricature. I continued to read and came to realise that the story that I was taught in IR regarding the break between medieval and modern was simply wrong. *Profoundly wrong.* Moreover, the idea that there was a medieval world, dominated by religion, which disintegrated into the modern secular system of states was also wrong.

A parallel entry into the topic was through my first book, *Between Anarchy and Society: Trusteeship and the Obligations of Power.*<sup>7</sup> I conclude in that book, something to the effect of, "trusteeship is morally objectionable in IR, not because it's inefficient, this that or the other, but because it infringes on widely accepted ideas of common humanity and equality". Reading that sentence gave me a bit of a panic right before I sent the final manuscript to the publisher. It was a Friday, and I had to send it in by Monday, where I found myself going, "Oh my God, what does humanity mean? What exactly is this word, *humanity*?"



This links back to my approach to teaching, where I often pose questions like: What does 'responsibility' mean? What does 'the nation' mean? What does 'freedom' mean? What does 'equality' mean? If one thinks about the idea of 'common humanity' for very long enough, you'll end up with 'natural law' at some point; and if you explore 'natural law' long enough you'll end up in the Middle Ages. This drew me deeper into medieval thought, when I eventually came to see that the historical story that IR theorists tell is really difficult to sustain.

Historians of medieval political thought often operate with a different historical periodisation. We always tend to think in terms of the ancient, medieval and modern, with the 'modern' period beginning sometime in the mid-16th century. What particularly struck me as interesting, was the fact that these historians of medieval political thought operate in a totally different historical periodisation. The 12th or 13th century to the 18th century is typically regarded as a continuous period of historical experience and the Renaissance and Reformation, which typically date the start of the 'modern' in politics and IR, is not nearly as significant for them. I began to wonder about what IR would look like if I took their historical periodisation seriously. One objective of the book is to recover the forgotten continuity between 'medieval' and 'modern'.

The last thing I will say about this is that we should remember what we have inherited from the Middle Ages. The following didn't come from Greece and Rome: parliaments, the contract theory of government, natural rights, and universities. These are medieval ideas. In many respects, an important part of the argument is that the way we think about the world today, is not in the context of the Western political tradition and an inheritance from Greece and Rome, but rather it's a type of 'modern Middle Ages', with Latin Christendom being more important than many scholars realise. So, that's the short version of the book.

## Interview Conclusion

**Didi Given that Post Script will be read by the NUS PS community and beyond, would you like to say any final words or advice for the students in their PS and university journey?**

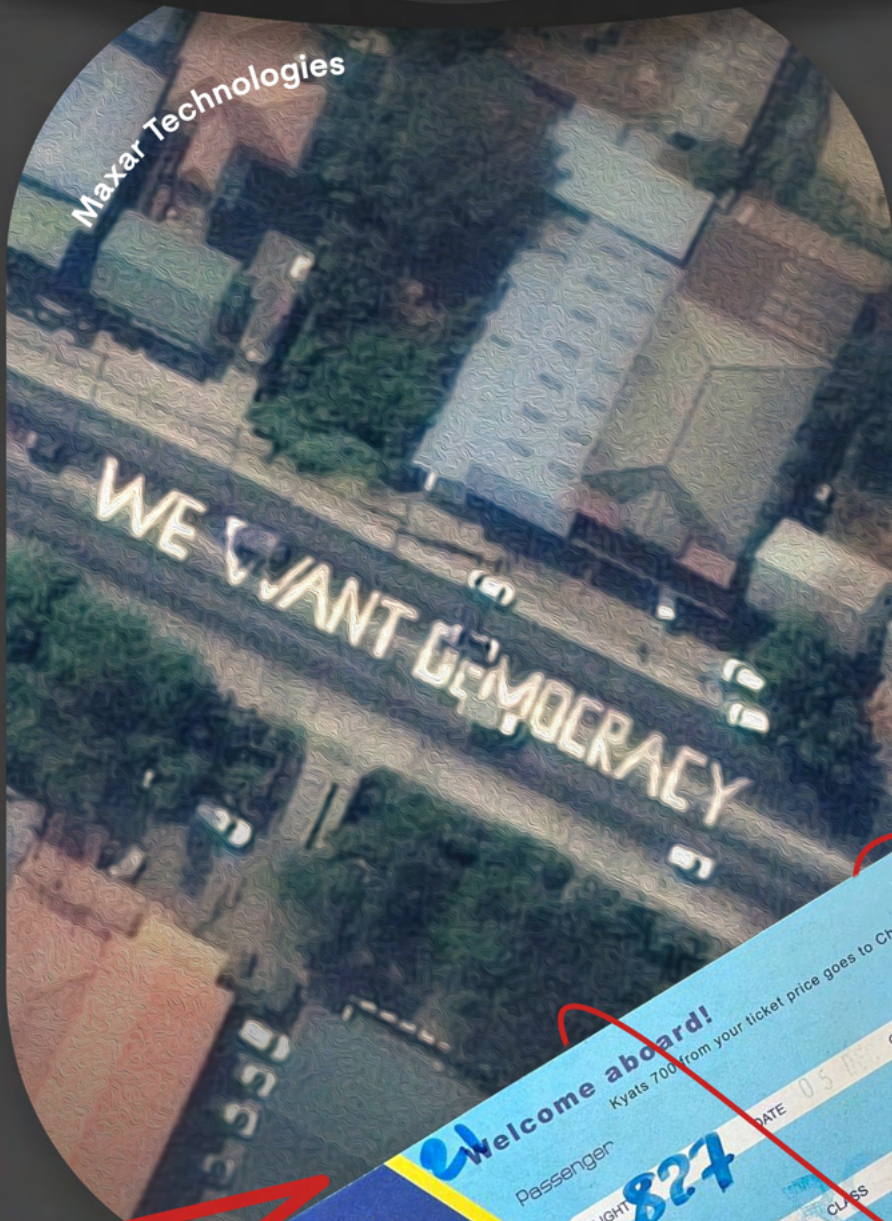
Prof Yes, I always give students the same advice that I'm always encouraging - that is to ask questions. Ask questions and do not be afraid to ask them. Ask difficult questions. Ask uncomfortable questions. Ask awkward questions, but always ask them. That's my advice.

## Notes

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# Fighting for Democracy, Away from Home: Thoughts on the Myanmar Protests

written by SUMANA PRASAD



In early November 2020, the National League for Democracy (NLD) scored a resounding victory in Myanmar's parliamentary general elections.<sup>1</sup> It achieved more than the 2/3 majority required to form the government of the day, stressing the Myanmar electorate's support for a nascent democracy.

However, the election victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party was ominously challenged by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development party (USDP) a few days later. The USDP refused to recognise the election results, claiming that the elections were fraudulent under the influence of the NLD.<sup>2</sup> Though the Union Election Commission denied such allegations, the rights of over 1.5 million Burmese to vote were cancelled.<sup>3</sup> The majority of this group were ethnic minorities, and the reason provided for voter disqualification was supposed security concerns in conflict-ridden areas.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, the NLD won the election by a landslide with approval from international and local election observers, and the military itself was unable to produce solid evidence of irregularities in the electoral process.<sup>5</sup>

On 1 February 2021, following multiple threats and criticisms levelled at the NLD, the military assumed power in a coup and declared a state of emergency. Aung San Suu Kyi and her senior party officials were detained as well. In an evocative statement directed to her citizens, Aung San Suu Kyi urged people to "respond and wholeheartedly protest against the coup by the military".<sup>6</sup>

The people of Myanmar were galvanized into action and took to the streets to protest against the sudden overthrow of a democracy that they had fought so long and so hard to keep alive. Since the onset of the protests, hundreds have been arrested and over 700 civilians, including 46 children, have been killed, with the military reverting to their well-known repertoires of violence to clamp down on dissent.<sup>7</sup>





Yet, reading about the coup and the progress of the protests through news articles and social media does a disservice to the multitude of emotions faced by the Burmese as they witness their nation's fledgling democracy hanging by a thread. To gain a more intimate perspective on the protests and what it represents for the future of Myanmar, I interviewed Min and Phoo (pseudonyms), two Burmese undergraduate students who have lived and studied in Singapore for over 10 years now.



# Kindling the Flame: **First Reactions** to the Coup and Protests

Phoo's initial reaction to the coup was one of anger and shock. "How could it happen again?", she recalls wondering to herself.

"I was in a state of denial [at first], then I thought to myself, 'I got to do something about it'".

Over 2000 kilometers away from her home country, Phoo felt that the most tangible thing she could do was to raise awareness of the situation on social media. What followed was @whatshappeninginmyanmar (<https://linktr.ee/whatshappeninginmyanmar>), an extensive resource bank that updates on ongoing protests, documents news articles that elucidate the complex history of military rule and democracy in Myanmar, and contains donation links to support the movement. The resource bank is solely managed by Phoo, who juggles the platform amidst her final year of university studies.

When I ask Min, a NUS undergraduate, if he expected protests to break out in the aftermath of the coup, he states it was not a matter of if, but when.

"The first form of protests I got to know about were the pots and pans banging...I thought it was a really clever way of protesting," he says in reference to the civil disobedience movement that preceded the street protests. He tells me that the act of banging metal objects is significant in Burmese culture as it is meant to ward off evil.



Women flying the htamein, or women's sarongs, in protest - men hesitate to walk under the htamein as it is an affront to their masculinity.

The civil disobedience movement took many forms, all of which severely disrupted state machinery and reflected the fierce resistance of Burmese people from all walks of life - citizens laid down on train tracks, civil servants boycotted work and as a result, military offices, banks and hospitals were unable to operate at full capacity.<sup>8</sup>

On whether she would join the protests if she were back in Myanmar, Phoo answers with a resolute yes.

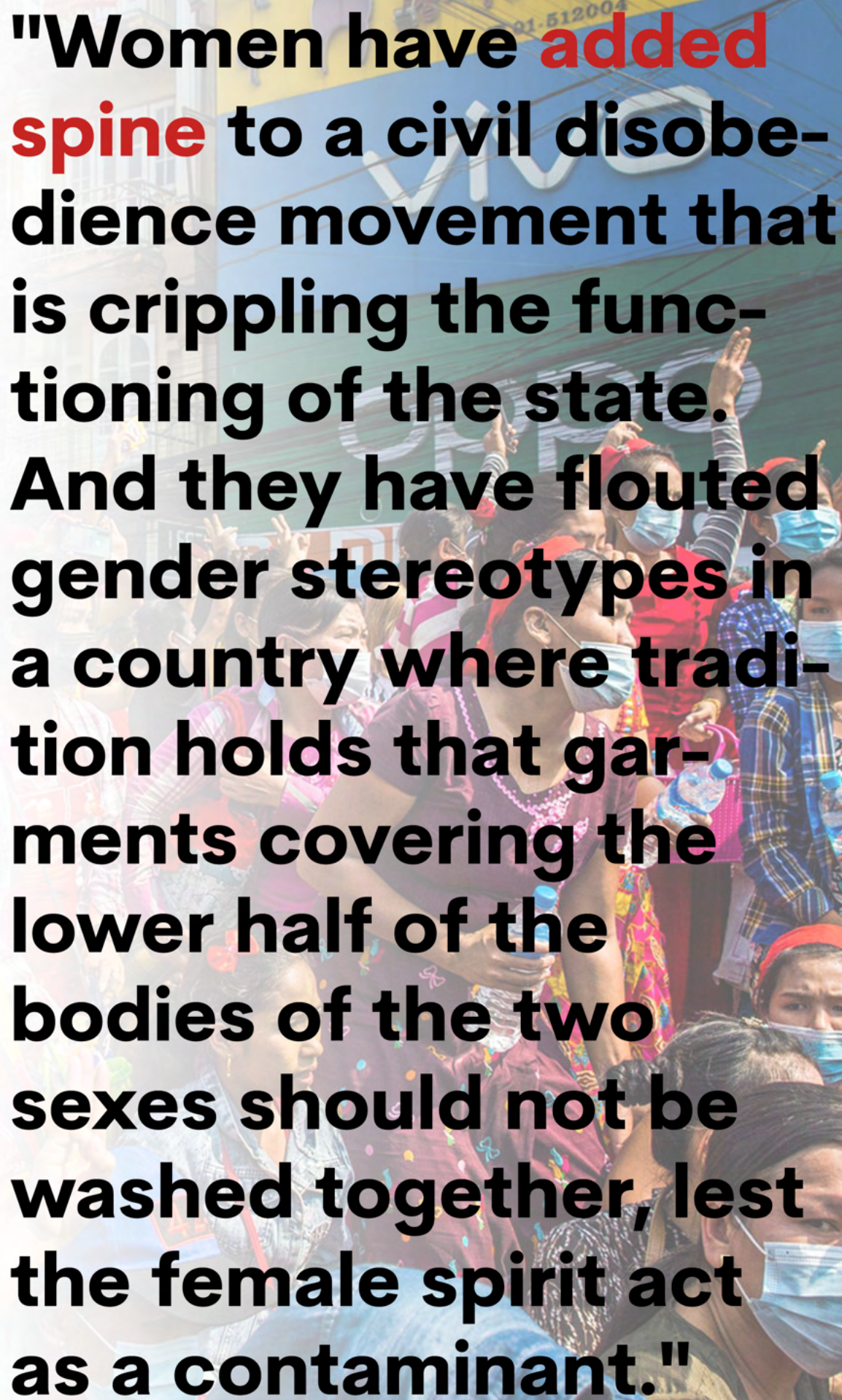
“I see so many women at the frontline of the protests and I feel so empowered. The bravery they have is just so wonderful, it’s amazing.”

With regards to his own friends back in Yangon participating in the protests, Min is in awe at the almost surreal yet telling image it strikes:

“They’re really interesting people - photographers, stylists and models - and you wouldn’t expect them to be out in the streets looking all rugged. Now they’re all dressed in helmets and gear, and it’s crazy to see the change that has happened... it just says a lot on how important it is for them - even people whom I wouldn’t have imagined protesting have gone on the streets to risk their lives.”

STR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

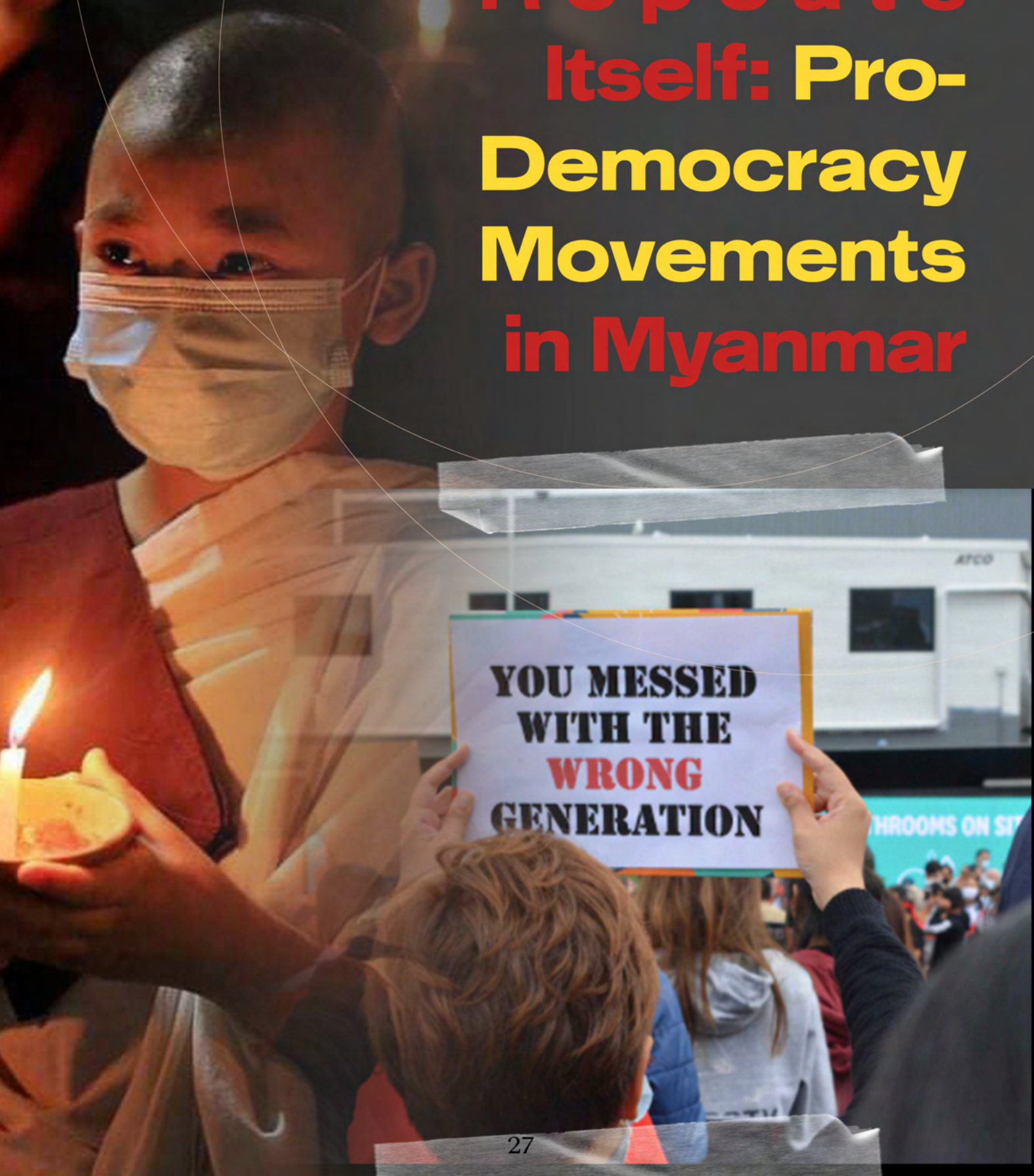




**"Women have added spine to a civil disobedience movement that is crippling the functioning of the state. And they have flouted gender stereotypes in a country where tradition holds that garments covering the lower half of the bodies of the two sexes should not be washed together, lest the female spirit act as a contaminant."**

Buddhist Monks holding  
a candlelight vigil in the  
Amarapura Monastery in  
Mandalay

# History Repeats Itself: Pro- Democracy Movements in Myanmar



The act of protesting is not novel for the Burmese people. The fight for democracy and the fight against the military's repressive governance are intertwined and ingrained in the history of post-1962 Burma. The August 1988 movement, for example, was a significant political movement that saw university students organizing themselves to protest against the inefficient and harsh military dictatorship under General Ne Win.

The 8888 uprising is significant to Min as well, despite occurring over 30 years ago. After all, his mother was directly involved in the demonstrations, as he recounts with deep reverence.

“She was in university back then, protesting together with her friends. She told me she got arrested for it and she was detained together with the other students. She was stuck there for a month - so my mom was in jail for awhile..”

Phoo's father was also reminded of the 1988 revolutions when he heard about the military's aggression against civilians in the current protests. “He feels that it's happening again, using old tactics by killing anyone on the streets, instilling fear so people do not come out to protest,” she tells me.

Indeed, the 8888 demonstrations were violently clamped down by the military, with thousands estimated to have been killed and thousands more detained.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the horrendous violence experienced by protestors and a return to oppressive military rule under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) did not douse the flames of democracy that were nascent in the hearts of many Burmese citizens. The symbolic red flags bearing the image of a fighting peacock that were waved through the streets of Yangon in 1988 became the

enduring logo of the NLD.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, in a 1990 election, the overwhelming victory of the NLD was immediately nullified and Aung San Suu Kyi entered house arrest - an uncanny mirror to the events unfolding in Myanmar today.

Min shares a similar sentiment of history repeating itself, but with specific regard to the 2008 Saffron Revolution, which was when he and his family moved to Singapore. The 2008 Saffron Revolution was a movement primarily led by Buddhist monks to protest the rise in prices of fuel - unsurprisingly, it was met with violent repression.

“From my house, we could hear gunshots and people screaming. It was really chaotic during that time...Now that I'm hearing about the protests back home, it's actually quite crazy, it's almost a full-circle moment, like ‘oh man, we're back here again’”, he says.

I wonder how his mother, who experienced both the 1988 and 2008 movements, reacted to the outbreak of protests in 2021.

“She's just jaded, a lot of the older Burmese people in Singapore are at least...I could sense helplessness, they all feel like they could be doing more but they can't, they're trapped in this place where they can't really do much for anyone back home,” he answers.

“In true Buddhist fashion, they just stay calm, choose compassion,” he adds on lightheartedly.

*Hot air balloons with the three-finger salute flown in the city of Taunggyi in the Shan State*

# Expressing Solidarity = Importing Politics?

## Expressing Solidarity = Importing Politics?

### Expressing Solidarity = Importing Politics?

Though they are far from the locus of action, social media has proven to be a mighty useful tool for Burmese in Singapore to stay updated on the progress of protests, express solidarity with protestors on ground and raise awareness. In Myanmar, even though the junta has blocked access to Internet and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, many tech-savvy users are able to circumvent the blocks by utilizing VPN.<sup>11</sup>

When asked about the importance of social media to the protests, Min points out that it is more than just a tool for mobilization and communication: “People would post like, ‘Oh don’t go to this area of Yangon, the military is there, be careful!’. So it’s also been a really great tool for safety as well.”



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More interestingly, perhaps, social media aids in the creation of transnational networks of solidarity, and enables the flow of ideas and symbols from one area of conflict to another. Min raises the example of the three-finger salute used amongst Burmese protestors, which was previously adopted in the Hong Kong and Thailand pro-democracy movements back in 2020.

The shared symbol is a direct influence of the ‘Milk Tea Alliance’, a transnational network of youth involved in pro-democracy movements against their governments, specifically in Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan and now, Myanmar.<sup>12</sup> Just as Thai youths rallied to ‘Free Hong Kong!’ and Taiwanese activists gathered to support democracy in Thailand, the world witnessed another riveting show of solidarity when activists across Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia protested online and offline in support of Myanmar.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, the express of support and solidarity for Myanmar has to take a different form in Singapore, considering the city-state’s strict laws against public assembly and protesting. Raising awareness online is common though there still persists a pervasive sense of fear.



A ‘watermelon strike’ in Thingangyun township in Yangon, on Sunday 11 April, protesting against low prices offered to Myanmar watermelons – a key export to China – and calling for boycott of Chinese fruit

“Someone was saying on Instagram that **directly donating to the movement is considered protesting, or you can’t post the three-finger sign as that is considered protesting too**”, Min adds, highlighting how cautious one must be to even show support online.

Overall, it has been “stifling and scary” for Min, as it most likely is for other Burmese people in Singapore. Min informs me that he was aware of the police going down to Peninsular Plaza, also known as Singapore’s Little Burma, to inform everyone that they could not protest in Singapore. This is unsurprising, considering the Singapore Police Force’s (SPF) warning on 5 February against protesting for Myanmar: **“Foreigners visiting, working or living in Singapore are also reminded to abide by our law. They should not import the politics of their own countries into Singapore.”**<sup>14</sup>

In our interview, Phoo and I discuss how this statement is jarring, hypocritical almost, considering Singapore’s own complicity in the politics of Myanmar vis-à-vis its strong business ties with the junta. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, Singapore is Myanmar’s largest foreign investor.<sup>15</sup> In response to pressure from organizations like Justice for Myanmar, TRD Consulting (a Singaporean firm that supplies anti-drone products to the Myanmar police) and Lim Kaling (a Singaporean businessman with shares in the Tatmadaw-owned Virginia Tobacco Company), announced that they would cancel business deals and cut ties with the military immediately.<sup>16</sup> However, there still lacks a consensus on imposing economic sanctions on Myanmar since such actions could hurt Burmese civilians the most, according to Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.<sup>17</sup>



As we discuss how else Singapore and Singaporeans in general can show support, Phoo mentions the importance of being more empathetic towards foreign domestic workers from Myanmar.

“I have the privilege to go about my own life but the workers can’t cope with what’s going on. **It’s hard for them to grieve because they still have to work.** Work is their life,” she says, reasserting the need for greater care and support for Burmese living in Singapore, including domestic workers and students.

# Where There is Hope, There is Hardship

While discussing the events of Myanmar, Min shares a heartwarming anecdote about his first time voting for the Myanmar elections back in November 2020 - the same election that saw the NLD winning by an overwhelming margin and that preceded the coup.

His mother and him were involved in mobilising workers who were trapped in dormitories due to COVID-19 to vote during the elections with the help of the Myanmar Embassy. At the end of polling day, when he was interviewed about his experience with first-time voting, he recalls saying, “I’m really proud of my country for having an election and this election means a lot for everyone, especially for people who have been marginalized for so long. For ethnic minorities in Myanmar, it means a lot for them, it affects them a lot more than it would people of privilege, so I really want that outcome for Myanmar and that’s why I voted as well.”

However, the bright future he and many others had hoped for during election season was sadly short-lived. Now, when I ask Min what future he foresees for Myanmar, he sounds uncertain.



Demonstrators hold flowers in memory of the victims of the violent crackdown on protests against the military takeover during a ‘flower strike’.

“It’s really difficult to even start thinking about it, quite honestly speaking. We’ve been under military dictatorship for so long and it’s difficult to imagine a future without it. I can’t even imagine the military not having 25% of the seats [in parliament] ... last year was the first time I voted...and I was hoping to see some change. But like I always tell my friends, whenever I see something good happen, it always backtracks... it’s honestly disheartening.”

I pose the same question to Phoo, who worries about the sustainability of the protests even as she acknowledges the unyielding resolve of Burmese protesters.

“Now it’s just people being kind and distributing what they have: donating rice for free, being disciplined in taking what is needed and giving away what little they have... but the economy is down, food is an issue and imports have stopped as well.”

Even as we discuss the resource bank and tangible ways to support the Burmese, Phoo admits that she is worried about how the donations are being distributed back in Myanmar amidst widespread bank closures. She mentions that it is mostly based on “trust” and “faith” that it will reach the people who need it.



# Democracy: What Would It Look Like?

Reality seems especially bleak now, with international sanctions and condemnation doing little to affect the hardline stance of the junta and its indiscriminate use of violence against adults and children alike.

The fight for democracy is taking more than it can give. But it has not faltered, not yet. Even as the death toll exponentially rises, the people of Myanmar continue turning up on the streets to reclaim a democracy that they have only briefly glimpsed thus far.

When I ask Phoo what democracy means to her, there is only a brief moment of hesitation before she speaks up.

“A democracy would unite us along the lines of our differences. I’d like to see a country that can unpack and unlearn what they have believed in for so many years and work towards a more understandable society that looks out for each other,” she says, hoping that Myanmar can work towards equality for all races, genders and social classes.

**“A democracy would unite us along the lines of our differences. I’d like to see a country that can unpack and unlearn what they have believed in for so many years and work towards a more understandable society that looks out for each other.”**

Similarly, Min is cognizant of the diverse ethnic make-up of Myanmar and what that could represent for democracy in Myanmar: “Back in Myanmar, there are a lot of ethnic groups and these ethnic groups do not receive the same treatment. You need to have regionally sensitive governing bodies and that’s important, that’s what true democracy means: being sensitive to the voices of the people and the region they live in, and the culture that they’ve known so long.”

*“At the root of it, it’s about giving power to the people. It’s about giving us a voice.”*

It most certainly is not a lot to ask for. Yet, the outcome of the protests and its impact on Myanmar’s economy, politics and society in the long run remain to be seen.

For now, though, much like the Pyit Tine Htaung balance doll that rights itself every time it is thrown to the ground, the Burmese rise again and again, resiliently striving for a country that can recognise them as equals.

Design by CELESTE KOH  
Photography AS CREDITED



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# **SINGAPORE WOMEN:** Our story & Never-ending Struggles

ARTICLE BY CHLOE TAN YING XUAN  
DESIGN BY HAN XIYI

# An Unequal Start

In 2020, the government announced plans to craft a White Paper aiming to address women's issues in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> This may seem almost uncharacteristic for a country that prides itself in being “meritocratic”, where in theory, everyone can rise to the top as long as they work hard regardless of race, gender, financial background, etc.<sup>2</sup> The principle of meritocracy had resulted in a perception that Singapore does not judge based on one's gender. However, there still exists a strong patriarchal mindset in the society where women are expected to fulfill a caretaker role in the household, with about 78% of females indicating that family is their greatest deterrent from joining the workforce in a 2016 government survey.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it does seem that gender inequality is still a prevalently significant issue here in Singapore. Gender inequality is a relatively loaded term, so for this article, it will be understood as the “**legal, social and cultural situation in which gender determines different rights and dignity for women and men**”, whereby there is unequal access to such rights and the perpetuation of socio-cultural gender norms.<sup>4</sup>

**8 in 10**

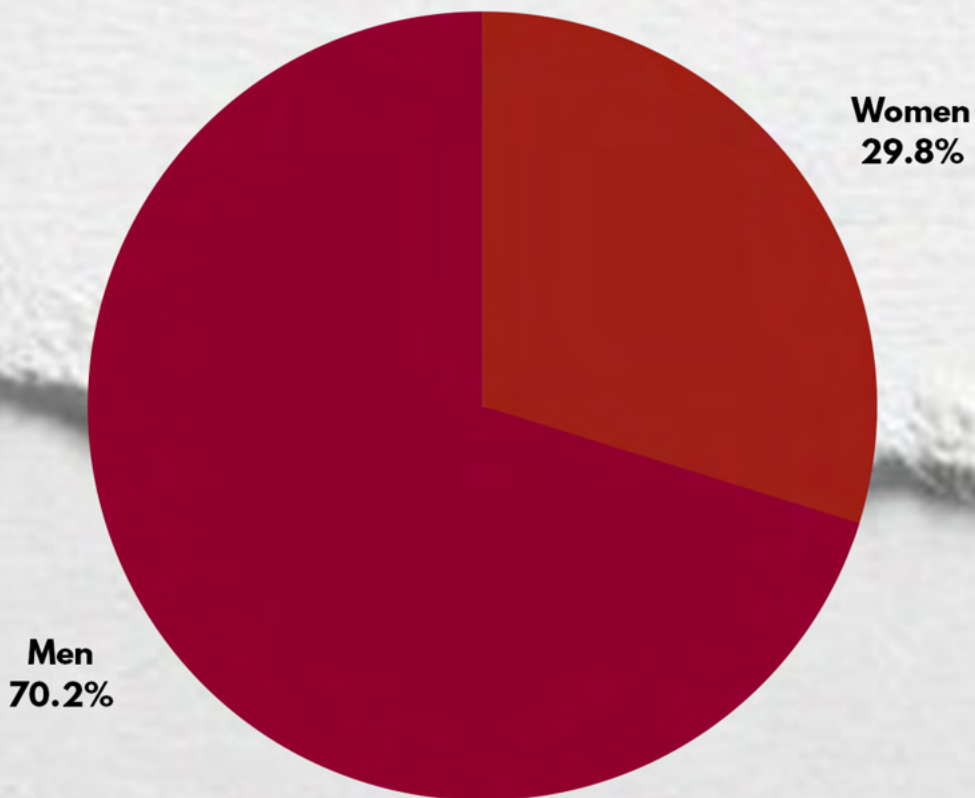
women feel that **family** is their greatest deterrent from joining the workforce.





In politics, specifically in Parliament, gender inequality is most visibly manifested in the way women are relatively under-represented and held at different standards than their male counterparts. Currently, there are only 31 female members out of 104 seats including Non-Elected Members of Parliament (NMP) and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMP), which translates to about 29.8%.<sup>5</sup> This is still lower than the international standard of 30% female leadership representation, that was set by the United Nations (UN).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, there is a completely divergent criteria of capability for women in Singapore and under-representation of females in high-profile public positions.<sup>7</sup> This article will then examine the history of women in post-independence Singapore politics, the situation today and what else can be done moving forward. Ultimately, this article argues that there is still insufficient female representation in Parliament and that there is much to be done to tackle gender inequality as a whole in Singapore.

### Gender Inequality in the Parliament



# The Story of Women in Post-Independence Singapore Politics



**1948**

It is worth acknowledging that Singaporean women were given constitutional rights to vote in 1948 (on an optional basis).



**1955**

and were included in the automatic voter registration in 1955, so they did not have to struggle for universal suffrage, as in many other countries.<sup>8</sup>

Before discussing gender inequality in the context of post-independence Singaporean politics, a historical overlook on the relationship between women and politics in Singapore is needed.



1959

In the 1959 elections, so as to both appeal to female voters and secure wide support, political parties had created women's sections/wings. The People's Action Party (PAP) even included women's rights in its party manifesto, fielded five female candidates, and adopted 'One Man One Wife' as part of its election slogans in a period where polygamy was strife. The 1959 elections ended with a PAP victory and four women out of 51 Assemblymen – Chan Choy Siong, Ho Puay Choo, Sahorah bte Ahmat and Fung Yin Ching – were elected into the Legislative Assembly. Additionally, Chua Seng Kim (better known as Mrs Seow Peck Leng) of the Singapore People's Alliance was also elected to become the first female Opposition member.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, one can starkly observe that no females were appointed into the Cabinet, despite the apparent electoral emphasis on equality between the two genders.



1970

After Chan Choy Siong retired in 1970, the Women's League of the PAP (department focused on women's issues) became defunct in 1975. The political scene became completely dominated by men, even though opposition parties tried to field female candidates for elections, their efforts were futile.

No opposition won a single parliamentary seat, as the PAP won landslide victories in the 1972, 1976, and 1980 General Elections and established an all-male Cabinet.<sup>10</sup> This could reflect the low priority that the PAP had put into fielding new female candidates, due to its steady grasp of political power by then. This could also be resultant of the declining birth rates in

the 1980s, where patriarchal attitudes were propagated and women were encouraged to take on more domestic roles in society. They were expected to procreate and sustain the nuclear family unit. This is in-line with the idea of women being caretakers and men being

the heads of the household as a largely Asian tradition.<sup>11</sup> This patriarchal attitude is explicitly demonstrated in a 1983 speech by the late PM Lee, who said the following:

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“We must further amend our policies, and try to reshape our demographic configuration so that our better-educated women will have more children to be adequately represented in the next generation...

Equal employment opportunities, yes, but we shouldn't get our women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers. ...

You just can't be doing a full-time heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children.”<sup>12</sup>

“ You just can’t be doing a full-time heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children. ”



## 1984

Nevertheless, women returned to Parliament in 1984 with the election of highly-educated and capable women such as Dr Dixie Tan, Dr Aline Wong and Ms Foo Yee Shoon (better known as Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon) from the PAP. However, stronger female representation still did not necessarily translate to giving women equal opportunities in significant positions of power.<sup>13</sup>

## 1990

Fourteen years after the dissolution of the Women’s League, the PAP Women’s Wing was inaugurated, aimed at empowering more women to be active in politics.<sup>14</sup> More women had also found their way into politics as NMPs and NCMPs, under such schemes which invited more independent voices, diversifying experiences and perspectives to Parliament

## 2002

In 2002, Lim Hwee Hua became the first female Deputy Speaker of Parliament. Most importantly, it was only in 2009, close to 50 years after our independence, that Lim made Singapore history as the first woman to be appointed to the Cabinet, as a full Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office and the Second Minister for Finance and Transport.<sup>15</sup>

# The Situation Today

In current times, many scholars and activists alike agree on the need for more female representation in Parliament and society-at-large. This argument is founded on two main justifications: (1) Parliament needs to mirror the population dynamics and (2) women in politics would provide greater diversity of views and experiences.<sup>16</sup>

Firstly, Parliament should mirror the population dynamics, so as to ensure that everyone's views are fairly and better represented. The way in which women are portrayed and represented in politics sets the ground for social norms. These norms can then shape domestic and societal structures that influence policy-making and public institutions.<sup>17</sup> The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) further confirms this, claiming that the Cabinet and legislatures are the main contributors to gender equality and diversity that "shape societal attitudes toward women's roles, capacities and responsibilities."<sup>18</sup>

The 2017 report of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) argues that characteristics and skills expected of leaders, such as assertiveness, dominance or rational thinking, are typically associated with masculinity and thus leadership is commonly analogous to men.<sup>19</sup> The report further establishes that gender stereotypes are also reflected in cabinet portfolio designations. Men dominate positions relating to basic state functions such as defence, justice and foreign policy, whereas women are often relegated to ministries with socio-cultural functions, reinforcing stereotypical expectations that women are better suited to fields related to internal affairs and culture.<sup>20</sup> This corroborates with the fact that Singaporean female ministers are also more likely to helm domestic-related positions: Mrs Josephine Teo helmed the Ministry of Manpower and Ministry of Home Affairs, and Ms Grace Fu leads the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment.<sup>21</sup> The report goes on to assert that political parties themselves are gatekeeping leadership positions from female representatives too.<sup>22</sup>



**"Women are able to bring important issues to the table and also offer different perspectives."**

- Sun Xueling

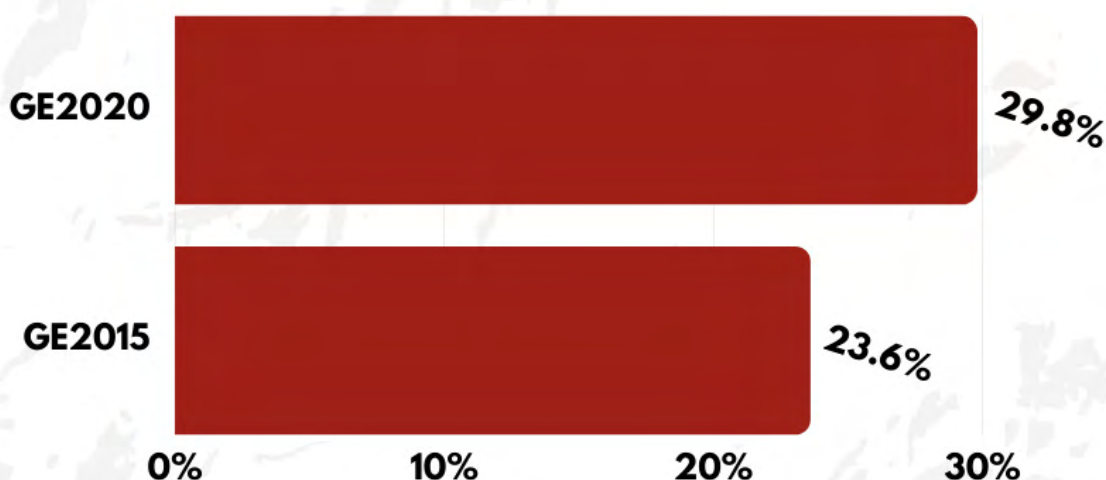
Seeing as the PAP is quite exclusive and actively determines who should be recruited and assigned which designation in Government,<sup>23</sup> there appears to be an unwillingness in the PAP to entrust their female politicians into high-profile positions such as Minister of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Education, or even Finance, as they often do with other high-performing male candidates. An example would be Dr Ng Eng Hen's past appointments in the Ministry of Education and Manpower, despite his medical background as an established surgeon.<sup>24</sup>

Singapore's 2020 General Elections (GE2020) then signalled a shift on the gender front, seeing the highest number of fielded female candidates ever, with **40 women contesting parliamentary seats out of the total of 93.**<sup>25</sup> As aforementioned, this had translated to the **highest female parliamentary representation ever of about 29.8%**, including NMPs and NCMPs. Nevertheless, Singapore should aim higher given that women constitute slightly over 50% of the population. Thus, should the nation follow the idea of


mirroring population make-up in politics, the number of females should coincide so as to safeguard women's interests and fairness within Parliament.

Secondly, more women in politics presents the Government with the opportunity to tap upon a larger variety of experiences and resources, which can better tailor policies to the public. As mentioned by MP Sun Xue Ling, "women are able to bring important issues to the table and also offer different perspectives [regarding national and political issues]."<sup>26</sup> This was further supported by Ms Ngiow, a senior director at public policy consultancy BowerGroupAsia, who noted that female politicians are more inclined to tackle areas beyond traditional bread-and-butter issues.<sup>27</sup> Some female parliamentarians include MP Tin Pei Ling who strongly advocates for less-discussed issues such as mental health and difficulties faced by single parents, and MP Raeesah Khan, who is the founder of Reyna Movement, a non-profit organisation that seeks to empower underprivileged women.<sup>28</sup>

### Percentage of women in Parliament



## 29.8%: the percentage of women in Parliament



While there has been tremendous progress made since Singapore's independence and there exists significantly better female parliamentary representation today, these milestones should not be mistaken for sufficiency or equality. Little has changed in terms of Cabinet members and female presence within the PAP's Central Executive Committee (CEC). In the entirety of the CEC, only three women are board members, with only one belonging to a minority race.<sup>29</sup> This leads us to question whether there is still an invisible barrier to entry that continues to deter women from entering the political scene and high office.



# The Way Forward

“when it comes to politics -- there seems to be an inherent bias against a certain demographic, and that demographic tends to be young and female...This is not the same kind of focus that will be given to male politicians.”

The idea of a mindset shift to direct the caretaker burden away from women and join the workforce had until recently been a private affair that women were expected to handle personally. This expounds the idea of women being held back by personal problems that are in reality, a larger socio-political issue in of itself.

In order to tackle the problem of gender inequality in politics and society-at-large, a survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union had pushed for gender quotas to be enacted to safeguard the interests of women. This could be feasible seeing as there is a similar policy.

Moreover, it seems that the biggest obstacle against ensuring adequate female representation is the deeply-entrenched patriarchal traditions, which associate women to domestic roles within society. The political slogan, “The personal is political!”, popularised by feminist scholars and activists in the 1960s, best represents this difference in expectations. It declares that the personal problems of women are political problems and that these personal problems arose due to societal conditions that perpetuate them.<sup>30</sup> This idea appears to be reflected in Singaporean society at present which is still relatively conservative and continues to adopt the view that females are meant to be the caretakers of the family. This is corroborated by Nicole Seah, a widely-known Workers’ Party politician, who has voiced out the difficulties that she personally faced as a female political candidate. Notably, Seah highlights that:

“when it comes to **politics** - there seems to be an **inherent bias** against a certain demographic, and that demographic tends to be young and **female**. Even before people started hearing [her] speak, there was already this unnecessary scrutiny and focus on **appearance and being a girl**, more than what [she] had to say. There is a lot of **unnecessary comparison** to other girls, and they have articles like ‘How do our female politicians dress?’ She finds all of that quite insulting because this is **not the same kind of focus that will be given to male politicians.**<sup>31</sup> ”



The idea of a mindset shift to direct the caretaker burden away from women and join the workforce had until recently been a private affair that women were expected to handle personally.<sup>32</sup> This expounds the idea of women being held back by personal problems that are in reality, a larger socio-political issue in of itself.

In order to tackle the problem of gender inequality in politics and society-at-large, a survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union had pushed for gender quotas to be enacted to safeguard the interests of women.<sup>33</sup> This could be feasible seeing as there is a similar policy of racial requirement within the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system to ensure that interests of minority races are preserved in the community. However, this notion had been rejected by the Government, reasoning that the biggest obstacle in fielding female candidates is the lack of capable females due to the gruelling nature of the job. Minister for Home Affairs and Minister of Law, K. Shanmugam added that “it is an impossible task to balance your professional life with your political life” and that “not many men are prepared to make that sacrifice. For women, there is often the added question of the family as well”.<sup>34</sup>

The survey had also found that gender partnership is the key to real change. It points out that as men usually hold the major decision-making positions in society, they have to cooperate to enact concrete change. This collaboration has to be done within political parties, within parliament, and in policy-making.<sup>35</sup>

Another way to address gender inequality and negative stereotyping of women as leaders would require seeing female leadership as an alternative and viable way of government. Not in relation to male leadership (i.e. females are not as good as males because of various things), but rather, appreciating the nuances and characteristics of female leadership on its own merits.<sup>36</sup> Pullen and Vachhani assert that women are trapped in a double-bind of being required to “perform the masculine, rational order of leadership whilst still being subject to feminine ideals”.<sup>37</sup> Should society be able to look beyond traditional stereotypes and view female leaders on their own terms, only then is it possible to “liberate the feminine from the patriarchal authority and influence”.<sup>38</sup> Citing the profound example of New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, Pullen and Vachhani emphasise the potential of re-defining female leadership.

Ardern's success was credited to her caring and compassionate leadership style while staying resolute and rational simultaneously. In the 2019 Christchurch shooting, Ardern had shown sympathy and care to those affected and was decisive in clamping down on Islamophobic sentiments. Her actions exposed the world to a distinctive mix of compassion and strength at a time where female leaders were criticised for either being "too hard" or "too soft".<sup>39</sup>

Not only did she give birth to her first child while helming Prime Ministership, she had later on brought her child to attend a UN General Assembly, which elevated her reputation as an exemplary working mother.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, there exists other views of female leadership that can empower women, rather than subjecting them to negative stereotypes, that can bring great success - which Singapore can definitely learn from.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, leaps and bounds have been achieved for gender equality in Singapore from having no female representatives for fourteen years in the 70s to the 80s, to having the highest number of female parliamentarians ever in 2020. Nonetheless, there are many opportunities for improvements towards greater gender equality in Singapore. It seems that the Government itself has become more proactive in tackling women's issues like commissioning the White Paper on Women's rights and issues and have planned to consult various segments of society, across many backgrounds and genders.

This recognition of the need for a deep cultural and mindset shift is exactly what we need to ameliorate the impacts of gender inequality in our society. This is especially so as the entrenchment of patriarchal attitudes is still apparent. The Government will have to walk the talk and follow-up with concrete and meaningful initiatives to better integrate women, not only into the private sphere, but the political scene as well. **Let us strive for the day when a Singaporean woman is able to hold positions of power, like Prime Minister, without being questioned on her ability to handle the job alongside her familial duties.**



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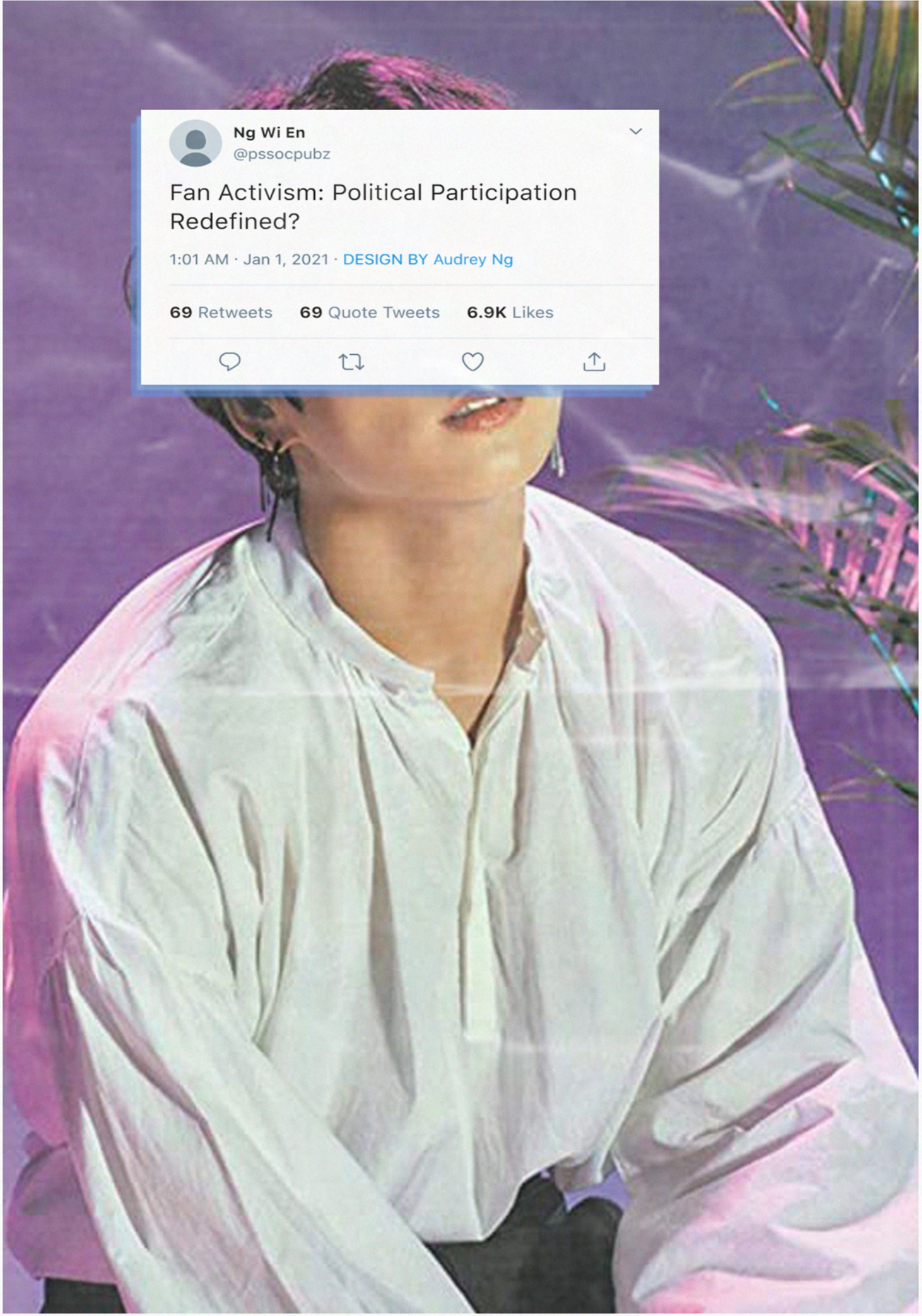
## Fan Activism: Political Participation Redefined?

1:01 AM · Jan 1, 2021 · DESIGN BY Audrey Ng

69 Retweets

69 Quote Tweets

6.9K Likes



## The Big Picture

According to the World Youth Report on youth civic engagement by the U.N., youths today are less interested in political participation than previous generations.<sup>1</sup> They are also less likely to vote or join advocacy organisations.<sup>2</sup> However, political participation is considered a necessary condition for democracy to function effectively.<sup>3</sup> As the upcoming generation to enter adulthood and begin taking on political responsibilities such as voting, the decrease in political participation by youths has led to high levels of public distress.<sup>4</sup> After all, such a degree of disconnect from political participation suggests a lack of political knowledge, as well as political apathy amongst youths!

However, this leans towards a more pessimistic outlook as scholars and activists are now suggesting that instead of declining political participation levels, there has been a transformation of youth political participation. In place of traditional or formal manners of political involvement, youths choose to engage with politics in autonomous ways, reflecting a new type of critical citizenship.<sup>5</sup> In his book, "The End of Representative Politics", political theorist Simon Tormey suggests that this phenomenon can be credited to the increasing amounts of scepticism amongst youths towards the ability of conventional political systems of representation to enact change.<sup>6</sup> Hence, rather than participating in politics in the ways generations before them have, youths are developing new modes of political participation outside the formal arena of politics.<sup>7</sup>



# What is Political Participation?

Political participation can be understood as ordinary citizens attempting to influence people in power to make a political difference.<sup>8</sup> In their study of factors influencing political participation, Verba, Nie and Kim identified four dimensions of formal political participation: voting, campaign activity, contacting public officials, and cooperative or communal activities.<sup>9</sup> Outside of these forms of formal participation are extra-parliamentary

forms of political participation, such as involvement in particular groups or specific issues that seek to manifest political change.<sup>10</sup> Critical consumption and participatory politics are other forms of extra-parliamentary political participation, where consumer-citizens boycott brands for ideological, ethical or environmental reasons, with intentions to influence political action.<sup>11</sup>

## Formal

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	voting
<input type="checkbox"/>	campaign activity
<input type="checkbox"/>	contacting public officials
<input type="checkbox"/>	cooperative or communal activities (volunteering)

## Extra-parliamentary





# Redefining Political Participation: Fan Activism

As a generation that grew up with the rapid expansion of online social platforms, youths are digitally savvy and are able to take advantage of these digital technologies to hold conversations and drive activism on both local and international scales.<sup>12</sup> In her examination of youths and their political participation, Philippa Collin suggests that "mediated youth participation" is a contemporary expression of youth citizenship.<sup>13</sup> While existing formal youth participation policies tended to reinforce existing structures of elitism, through digital technologies, "young people no longer need to join formal political organisations to participate in or be educated about collective political action".<sup>14</sup> One mediatised and extra-parliamentary space for advancing political conversations are fan communities, which has given rise to fan activism.

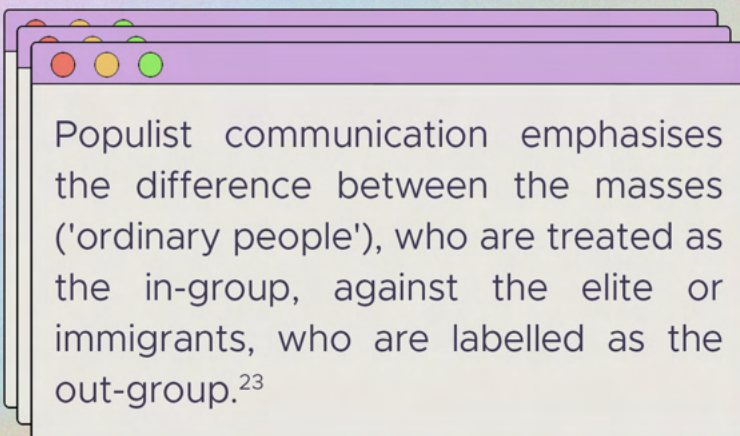
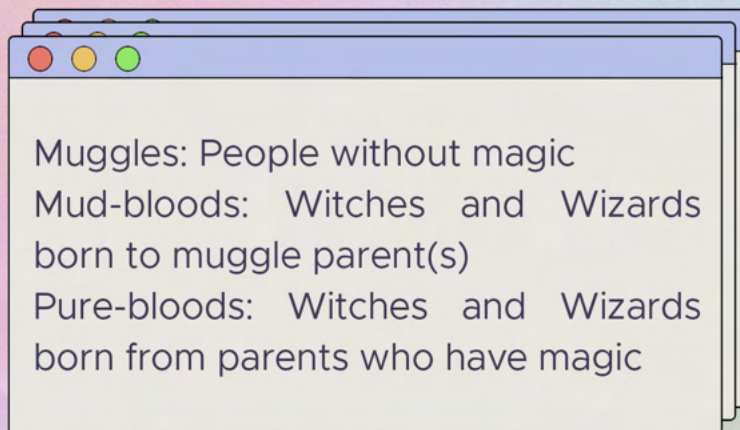
Fan activism is the belief that media created for entertainment can motivate youths to engage in political activism. Henry Jenkins, in his study of fan activism, suggests that fan activism is a form of participatory politics that involves "forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, (...) and (are) often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture".<sup>15</sup>

Fan activism itself is not purely political – sometimes, it is simply about petitioning to keep a character alive. Yet, it offers vast potential for political participation. Fan communities consume and re-imagine stories, enabling fans to feel a sense of shared ownership over their favourite content. During this process, fans critically interact with the production of culture and draw connections between their stories and politics.<sup>16</sup> Individual political participation can be hampered by a sense of discomfort with the public sharing of political views.<sup>17</sup> In comparison, fan communities provide a space for participants to express their political opinions using a privatised form of language that can be understood only by members within their fan communities.<sup>18</sup>

Andrew Slack, the founder of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), suggests that fan activism makes political participation both fun and imaginative because it represents a space where "shared allusions become socially and politically meaningful".<sup>19</sup> The language of activism is made accessible to fans, who can then transform cultural contents into cultural resources and participate in political change.<sup>20</sup>

# Harry Potter VS Immigration Policies

A prominent theme in the Harry Potter Universe is genetic politics.<sup>21</sup> Muggles and mud-bloods are often treated as the out-group and are discriminated against by pureblood eugenics believers for not having magic and for being of non-magic lineage.<sup>22</sup> The HPA repurposes this theme and builds on the understanding of the effects of genetic politics amongst fans (Potterheads) to call for resistance against real-life political issues such as immigration, which is common in populist rhetoric.



In the world of Harry Potter, Dumbledore's army was a secret organisation that worked to rebel against the paranoid Ministry of Magic and allies of the evil Lord Voldemort (believers of pure-blood superiority).<sup>24</sup> Tapping on this shared allusion, the HPA has a real-life version of Dumbledore's army, which seeks to "fight back against hatred and stand up for immigrants".<sup>25</sup>

For example, you'll find this on the HPA's Dumbledore's Army page:

"Join us by taking actions based on all four Hogwarts houses! Summon your inner Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin to join us for each action throughout August, September, and October. Up next, Hufflepuff!"<sup>26</sup>

With a direct way for fans to take action:

"Knowing how to help - whether that means volunteering, donating, standing up to ICE, or more - requires being connected to your local immigrant community."<sup>27</sup>

By mapping the effects of genetic politics in Harry Potter to real-life political concerns, the HPA's Dumbledore's Army provides Potterheads with the opportunity to participate in a consequential version of Dumbledore's Army to enact real, tangible change against 'evil' - in this case, problematic immigration policies. Through Dumbledore's Army, the HPA then seeks to manifest political changes in immigration policies.





## Avatar: The Last Airbender VS Racism in Media Representation

Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA) was a popular cartoon that was inspired by a mix of Asian cultures and provided many kids of Asian descent with characters to relate to.<sup>28</sup> When a movie adaptation was announced, fans were initially excited.<sup>29</sup> However, excitement turned to anger when it was revealed that white actors were cast for the leading roles, while darker-skinned actors played the villains.<sup>30</sup> This is problematic as it taps into the fantasy of whiteness as the ideal bearer of civilisation. At the same time, coloured bodies are treated as the racialised other, thereby building on existing inherited media stereotypes and reinforces racial divides.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, Racebending.com was found.<sup>35</sup> Racebending, which refers to the act of casting characters of colour as white, had textually poached its name from the concept of "bending" (the ability to manipulate elements) in ATLA.<sup>36</sup> Racebending.com aimed to affect the casting of the film and derail plans for future ATLA movies.<sup>37</sup> The website also organised and translated academic research on racial issues to make it more accessible for fans.<sup>38</sup> When the movie's cast did not change, Racebending.com managed to get fans and members of the public to boycott the film to the extent that it flopped.<sup>39</sup> Once the goals of Racebending.com had been achieved, the group continued to advocate for fair casting practices in Hollywood due to ongoing issues of racism in media representation.<sup>40</sup> This is not a new phenomenon, as fan activists organisations have often been found to "evolve into a watchdog organisation" over time, once their goals were achieved.<sup>41</sup>

Feminist, Marxist and critical race theorists have long argued that race is related to other manifestations of political power, as the superstructures of white supremacy permeate everyday life.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, western political thought, which lays the foundation for political studies, has long been critiqued to be based on a norm of homogeneity and advances epistemic privilege that is often too inaccessible to others different due to race or gender.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the power to define the portrayals of racialised others lies on the foundation of colonialism as well as political and economic domination.<sup>34</sup>

# KPop VS Racial Violence and Police Brutality

You may also recall how K-pop stans have trolled Trump and many other Republicans of late. They flooded the WhiteLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter with videos and memes of their favourite K-Pop stars and registered for tickets to Trump's rally to fill up slots – with no intention of showing up.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the HPA and Racebending.com, K-Pop stans did not form their communities around fictional universes, but around celebrities. As power users of social media, K-Pop stans have a history of holding K-Pop groups and agencies accountable for racially insensitive actions.<sup>43</sup> For example, in 2017, K-Pop girl group Mamamoo was called out for performing Bruno Mars' 'Uptown Funk' in blackface.<sup>44</sup> Following which, the group posted the following apology on Facebook.

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post from the group '마마무 Mamamoo' (Mamamoo), dated 'about 4 years ago'. The post is in Korean and contains an apology for a performance where the group used blackface. The text of the post is as follows:

안녕하세요. RBW입니다.  
 마마무 영콘서트를 통해 공개된 마크론슨의 '업타운핑크' 패러디 영상이 흑인 비하 오해를 불러 일으켜  
 인터넷 커뮤니티와 각종 SNS를 통해 논란이 불거지고 있습니다.  
 콘서트를 통해 다른 모습을 보여주자 누구에게나 잘 알려진 유명 곡 유적비디오를 패러디해보고자 한 기획의도였으나  
 오해의 소지가 생겨 2회 차 공연 부터는 문제 부분은 편집하겠습니다.  
 논란의 소지를 남긴 점 죄송하고 앞으로 세심한 부분까지 좀 더 신경쓰겠습니다.  
 다시 한 번 사과드립니다.

Below the Korean text is an English translation of the post:

Hello, this is Mamamoo.  
 We are extremely sorry for our insensitive actions and use of blackface in our video while portraying Bruno Mars. There is no excuse for what we did and there are not enough words to explain how regretful we are. We are heartbroken to have hurt our international K-Pop fans so deeply.  
 We love and care so much for all people of every race, sexuality, religion, and gender. We love all our fans and are so sorry to have hurt our fans in the black community.  
 We understand now why our actions were wrong and we never meant to do harm with our video. We were extremely ignorant of blackface and did not understand the implications of our actions.  
 We will be taking time to understand more about our international fans to ensure this never happens again. We hope that you will help to educate these and other issues so that we can become better people and better artists.  
 Thank you so much for bringing this to our attention and allowing us to address the wrongs that we have done.

At the bottom of the post, there are engagement metrics: 2.6K likes, 237 comments, and 121 shares.

Overlaid on the right side of the screenshot is a vertical column of English text, which appears to be a partial translation or commentary on the original post's content. It includes phrases like 'in our and', 'n our ind', 'ace in our sid and', 'igion, and n the black', 'nt to c lid no', 'n', 'us on tists.', and 'ne'.

At the bottom of the image, two members of the K-pop group Mamamoo are shown. They are wearing purple outfits and have their hair styled in a way that appears to be blackface.



K-Pop stans' involvement in U.S. politics in 2020 stemmed from anger over racial violence and police brutality and Trump's populist rhetoric, which were at odds with K-pop's message of love. For example, popular K-pop group B.T.S. tweeted the following statement in response to what was occurring in the U.S.<sup>45</sup>



Hence, on top of their predisposition to hold groups accountable for racist actions, following in their idols' steps, K-pop stans then mobilised their vast global social network to speak up against police brutality and racial violence. They also managed to sabotage the campaign of a U.S. Presidential candidate - only 6200 people out of an expected one million showed up for Trump's rally, and Trump and his running mate Pence had to cancel speeches to an expected "overflow" area.<sup>46</sup>

## Political participation or consumerism?

Of course, not everyone may agree that fan activism is actual political participation. Fan activism could also be seen as a consumer movement since fans want to support their favourite entertainment sources ethically.<sup>47</sup> However, consumerism is political. Through critical consumption, consumer-citizens choose to purchase or boycott products depending on factors such as fairness or justice.<sup>48</sup> This form of consumerism is considered as an alternative form of political engagement, as the individual's choice in itself becomes a political movement that challenges existing political structures.<sup>49</sup> As such, through fan activism, fans generate positive narratives and values for their fandoms, which they can then support through critical consumption.

## Real activism or Slacktivism?

Since most fan activism occurs online, fan activism may not be considered by some as real activism, but rather as 'Slacktivism'. Slacktivism refers to online political participation with "no impact on real-life political outcomes but only serves to increase the feel-good factor of the participants".<sup>50</sup> Others have remarked that online forms of political activism "succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice".<sup>51</sup> This suggests that there are still limitations to fan activism conducted online, since demonstrations and protests are reliant on strong ties that cannot be built using social media. As such, online fan-activism, which does not involve the same amount of effort required for traditional political participation, may be seen as a "lazy" alternative. However, as seen in the case of the HPA, fans are encouraged to display physical efforts (such as volunteering and standing up to ICE) in their attempts to enact political change. Furthermore, as the world becomes increasingly reliant on technology for communication, who is to say that online fan activism conducted through social media cannot lead to real-life political outcomes, as seen in the case of K-Pop stans sabotaging Trump's rally?

## Does Fan Activism really work?

There are also questions of whether fan activism can be applied to other causes, such as prison reform.<sup>52</sup> This is because fan activism seems to be limited to the extent that it only works if fans are concerned about that particular issue. However, what is clear is that fan activism offers spaces for political conversations amongst its communities and has structures in place to support political participation. Therefore, as Jenkins suggests, fan activism may be a way for pop culture to refresh political activism.<sup>53</sup> Do you think that fan activism can overcome its limitations and eventually be seen as a form of formal political participation?

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DESIGN BY Audrey Ng

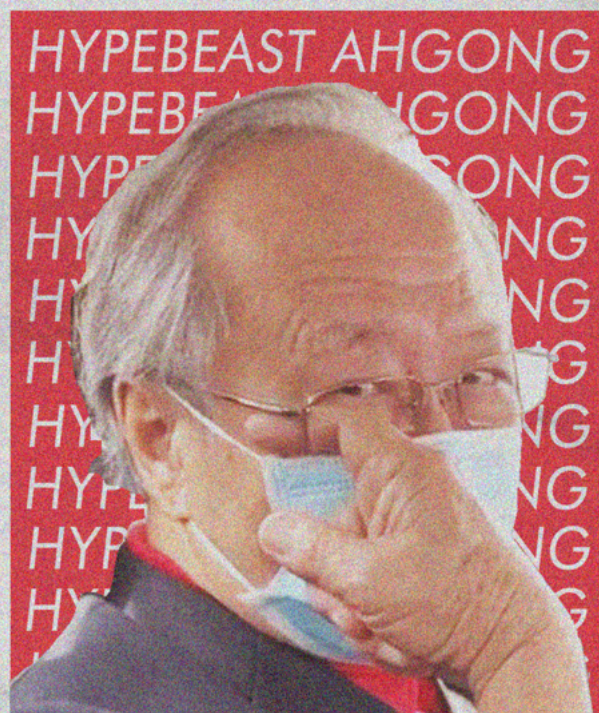
# POLITICISING SOCIAL MEDIA

Shifting Landscapes, Strategies and the Youth Vote

During Singapore's 2020 General Elections (GE2020), politicians went door-to-door to connect with constituency residents. Some welcomed these ritual-like visits, while others remained disinterested. But for Progress Singapore Party's founder Tan Cheng Bock, a single Instagram video posted nine days before polling - which shows the 81-year-old cheekily putting his finger through his lensless spectacles - shocked the internet and garnered some 118,000 views in a week. As he continued uploading amusing clips, including ukulele performances and eating flowers from his garden, his new following of Singaporean youths soon endeared him with the title "Hypebeast Ah Gong".

Tan Cheng Bock encapsulates the growing phenomenon of political engagement through social media, an amorphous but powerful medium that, in the midst of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, was arguably the most influential it has been in Singapore elections. Drawing from

observations during GE2020, this article examines social media's significance in Singapore's current politics and the effects it emanates on citizens. In particular, references to the youth are highlighted, given that they are the most active demographic on social media. This paper is categorised into three sections: First, social media's provision of alternative political discourses. Second, the PAP's response to the increased saturation of media narratives. Third, the growing emphasis on politicians' charisma in building legitimacy and electoral support.



# Alternative Voices

The coronavirus pandemic entailed stringent social-distancing measures mandated by the Singapore government, resulting in the absence of many traditional campaigning mechanisms such as physical rallies. Instead, most campaigning moved online and onto social media. While the same can be argued for other countries that held elections during the pandemic - such as the United States, Iceland and New Zealand - Singaporean elections differ significantly as they are held in the context of an electoral authoritarianism system.<sup>1</sup> Under this hybrid regime, popular elections occur amidst tendencies that violate democratic norms and instead resemble authoritarianism:<sup>2</sup> since Singapore's independence in 1965, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has secured critical advantages over the opposition through successive control of the mass media, civil service, and para-political grassroots networks.<sup>3</sup> Opposition members have been repressed through lawsuits, such as the late J.B Jeyaretnam, former leader of Workers' Party who was repeatedly sued for defamation by PAP members until bankruptcy.<sup>4</sup> Internationally, Singapore is recognised as "partially free" by the Freedom House index, scoring a combined 50 of 100 in political rights and civil liberties in 2020.<sup>5</sup> Notably, the degree of fairness in elections is ranked the lowest at one out of four, while freedom of media is ranked two.<sup>6</sup>

Given these considerations, social media emanates a distinctive influence over politics that is not strongly observed in established democracies,<sup>7</sup> presenting unique opportunities for political discourses to circumvent state narratives. This is especially impactful given that some 80 percent of the country's 5.69 million population are active social media users.<sup>8</sup> For instance, opposition parties capitalize on various social media platforms - most prominently Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok - to share information and foster alternative political dialogues,<sup>9</sup> with relatively inexpensive costs of promoting messages through advertisements further extending reach.<sup>10</sup> A prominent example includes Singapore Democratic Party's Secretary-General Chee Soon Juan, who actively takes to social media to critique policies and decisions made by the PAP. In one instance, he questions the data privacy in the state-mandated TraceTogether system.<sup>11</sup> Such dialogues are empirically lacking in local mainstream media, which virtually excludes articles that challenge the government's legitimacy - that is, "the acceptance both of authority and of the need to obey its commands."<sup>12</sup>

As the common man migrates to social media, more individuals have also taken it upon themselves to engage in citizen journalism. GE2020 saw citizen journalists particularly successful in galvanizing followers and fostering political discussions, with accounts such as Wake Up Singapore amassing over 110,500 followers on Facebook as of April 2021. The publication gained traction during GE2020 for circulating overtly anti-establishment posts, with statistics indicating an almost fourfold increased engagement rate on their Facebook page in the month leading to polling day.<sup>13</sup> In particular, most users engaged are observationally youths - which is unsurprising given that those aged 18 to 34 form the majority of Singapore's Instagram (67.5 percent) and Facebook (48.8 percent) users.<sup>14</sup> With the ability to highly engage the public in alternative political discourses, citizen journalism ultimately challenges the gatekeeping function of Singapore's mainstream media and, to a certain extent, serves as a check and balance to the media landscape.

However, there remains fundamental issues when citizen journalists operate through anonymity. Firstly, when there is a lack of explicit authorship, producers cannot be held accountable for the content published. Secondly, it is in this knowledge that there is less deterrence in circulating untruthful or decontextualized news; under anonymity, citizen journalists may be less motivated in adhering to the fundamental journalistic ethic of factual reporting. In the same sphere, Zhang notes that "bloggers seem willing to publish hearsay and gossip as long as the information caters to popular taste."<sup>15</sup> Viewers may draw false conclusions when such information is disseminated, with prolonged consumption likely to influence political ideologies and possibly the electoral vote itself.

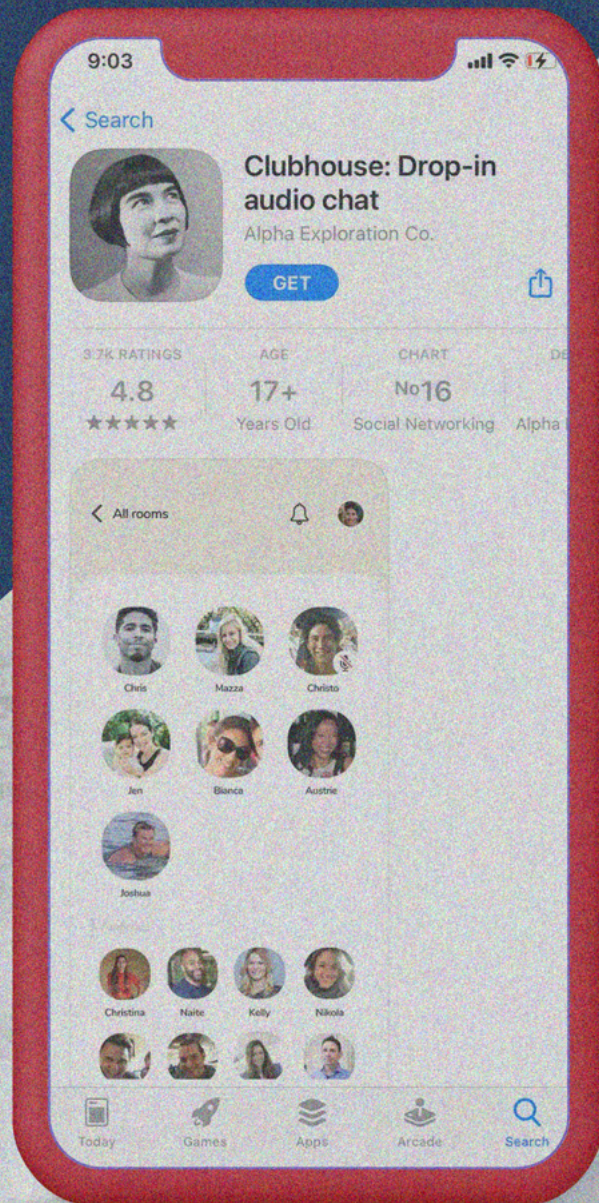
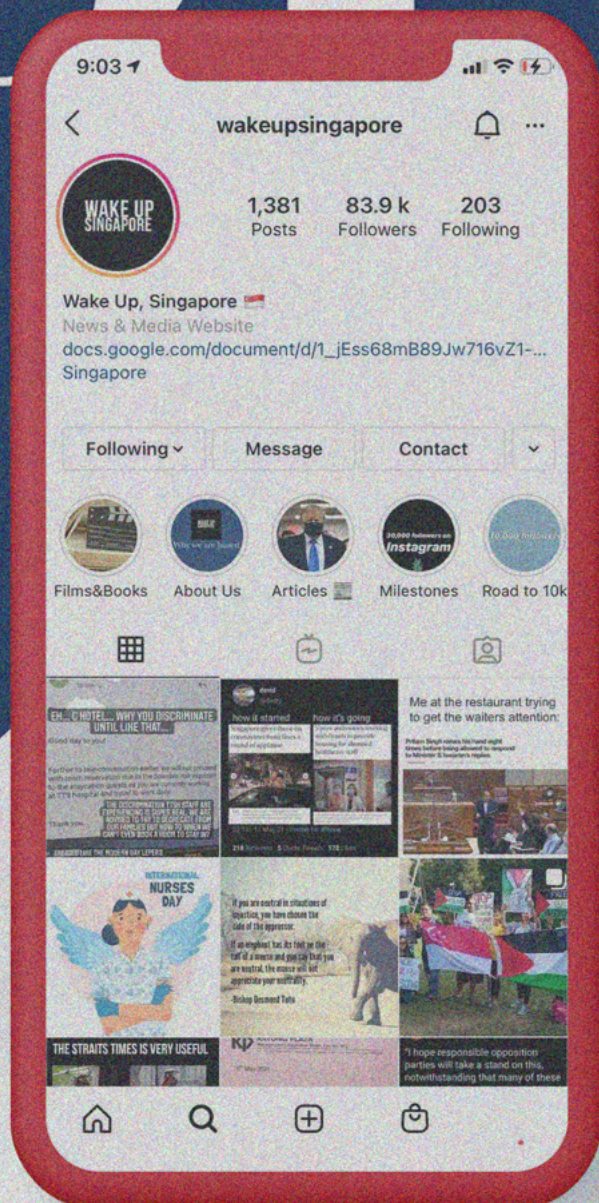


Chee Soon Juan 徐顺全  
15 January · 🌐

The TraceTogether saga is another sad – and frightening – chapter of our political history.



# ST



Youths are particularly vulnerable to these issues given their pervasiveness on social media, and are acknowledged to be more impressionable due to their general lack of experience in electoral voting and politics. Additionally, proliferating such discourses may downplay the credibility of citizen journalists who engage in inherently responsible political discussions, thereby adulterating social media's constructive efforts to amplify alternative voices.

Social media platforms and governments worldwide are thus constantly challenged in gatekeeping the content circulated by the public. This is especially so as new social media constantly emerge, such as Clubhouse. The audio-based social media platform is currently invite-only, allowing up to 5000 users to join a room to listen and discuss the topic at hand. Given the platform's exclusivity and audio-oriented nature, both the opportunity for alternative political discourses and difficulty of tracking misinformation are increased. In neighbouring Thailand, more citizens are tapping onto Clubhouse to raise political concerns and critique the Thai Monarchy - despite legislative threats from the government.<sup>16</sup>

These considerations would only grow in salience as more Singaporeans not only incorporate social media into their daily lives, but actively seek political engagement and news on these platforms. In contrast, traditional media - once the most instrumental tool of political communication to the masses - is in decline, with Singapore's print readership decreasing from 53 percent in 2017 to 43 percent the following year.<sup>17</sup> Aware of these shifting landscapes, the incumbent PAP has likewise taken responsive actions.



# The PAP Response

Since the 2000s and subsequent rise of the digital age, the PAP-dominated government has taken steps to curtail the pervasiveness of alternative voices. In 2001, it was mandatory for all political parties, candidates and groups to register their political websites.<sup>18</sup> In 2006, campaigning through all forms of new media, including social media and podcasts, were banned - though these restrictions were eased by 2011.<sup>19</sup> More recently in 2019, the government introduced the Protection from Online Falsehood and Manipulation Act (POFMA). The Act empowers the government legal ability to evaluate “information manipulation,” requiring offenders and digital platforms to take down content or upload corrections notices.<sup>20</sup>

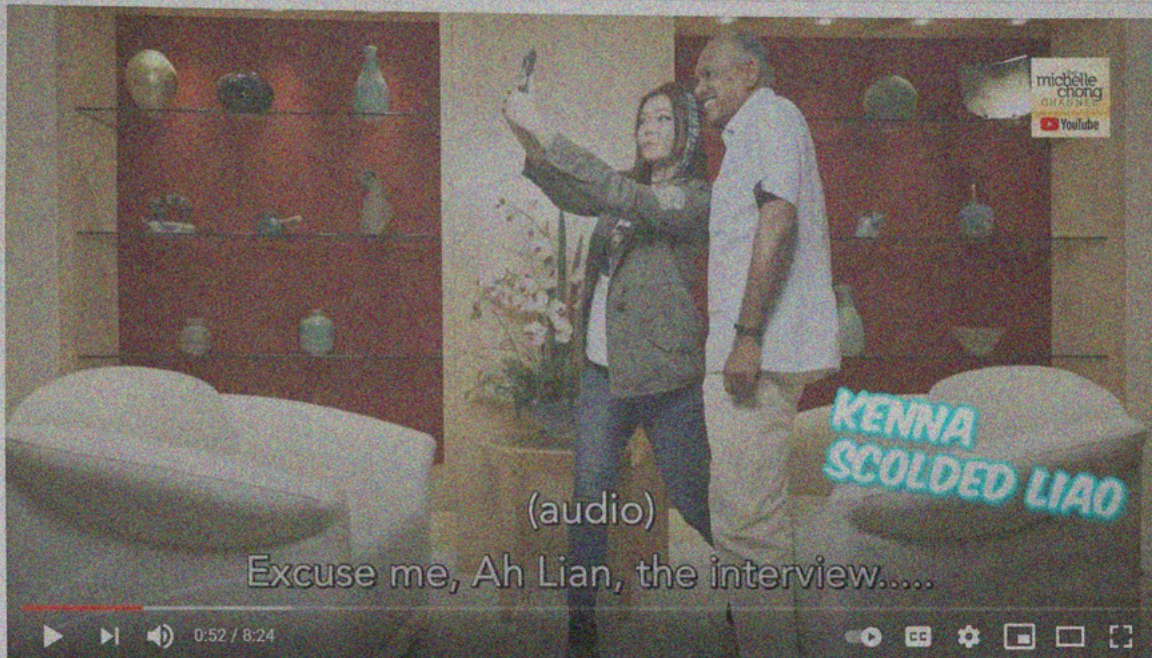
While POFMA may combat the circulation of inherent misinformation, the Act remains more strategic in regulating and intimidating alternative political discourses. POFMA has been used to counter dissidents, opposition parties and socio-political websites,<sup>21</sup> thereby suppressing both freedom of expression and electoral competition.<sup>22</sup> It is thus a form of “authoritarian innovation” that is presented as creating accountability, but in reality hinders its construction.<sup>23</sup> The incumbent has also engaged in increased digital marketing strategies to expand its online influence and soft-sell controversial policies.<sup>24</sup>



# The Pofma Times

YouTube

Search



Ah Lian VLOG #19: Premium Lian Meets Minister K Shanmugam

132,478 views • May 5, 2019

1.4K 280 SHARE SAVE ...

Netina Tan documents how this was applied to counter public backlash against POFMA:

A local Internet personality “Ah Lian” was recruited to interview the typically stern Law Minister K. Shanmugam to dispel concerns of POFMA repressing freedom of expression in a casual and vernacular way. The response to the PAP government’s use of “influencers” to soft-sell unpopular policies is mixed. While some appreciate the down to earth style, others find the attempts cringeworthy and manipulative.<sup>25</sup>

PAP’s response to the war on restraining social media narratives is thus strong when backed by legislation, but uncertain in effectively galvanising the party’s own organic engagement. There are many contributing factors - from content generation to marketing strategies - that shape the degree of public attention captured and retained on social media. Aware of the complex situation, politicians have also turned to unorthodox strategies to further engage with citizens online.

# Charisma and Celebrit

Legitimacy must first be established by politicians to effectively engage with the masses in social media. A key strategy observed includes the growing emphasis on charisma, one of Max Weber's three dimensions of legitimacy. The first two dimensions regard legitimacy through tradition, and rational legitimacy which is gained through the "legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issues commands."<sup>26</sup> The last dimension of legitimacy through charisma, which emphasises on "the exemplary character of an individual person,"<sup>27</sup> has proven the most unstable as it hinges legitimacy strictly on personality and away from affirmative actions. However, this may be an exception in the context of social media, where charisma may be a necessary condition to retain users' attention amidst the influx of accounts and posts.

Social media's visual-driven nature renders politicians' displayed conduct, activeness and content-generation a key criterion in engaging with the masses. Beyond public service announcements formatted plainly, politicians capitalise on the platforms' unique features such as live-streaming, video filters and question-and-answer functions. New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), who has some 8.8 million followers on Instagram as of April 2021, demonstrates the success of these strategies. A one-and-a-half hour long Instagram livestream in February 2021 garnered some 150,000 live viewers as she recounted her experience in the United States Capitol siege a month prior. Mainstream media around the world (New York Times, Guardian, The Straits Times) reported on the livestream, signalling a global understanding of social media's growing credibility and salience in political communication. Other posts show AOC eloquently and passionately



Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart  
Warms the cockles of my heart

**JAMUS LIM**  
MP-elect, Sengkang GRC

SINGAPORE  
VOTES 2020

# ising Politicians

discussing socio-economic issues and policies. Similarly in Singapore, Tan Cheng Bock's political updates on Instagram are sandwiched in-between videos of the politician decorating his garden and eating tacos, allowing viewers to glimpse into his private life and character. Likewise, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung's Instagram bio emphasises that he is a "Husband and father. Fan of Star Wars, rock music and football." Such juxtaposition not only displays these politicians as active and caring leaders, but simultaneously projects a personal connection with the common man. This is a personal-branding strategy that deeply relies on viewers' emotions and intuitions, potentially independent of concrete rationality.<sup>28</sup> And as charisma, social media and politics increasingly converge, case studies have shown a potential danger in celebritising politicians - particularly among youths.

As mentioned in the beginning of the paper, Tan Cheng Bock was crowned "Hypebeast Ah Gong" by young Singaporeans for his trendy and candid posts. Similarly, after the Workers' Party's (WP) narrow victory over the PAP to secure Sengkang GRC during GE2020 (52.13 to 47.87 percent),<sup>29</sup> WP member Jamus Lim went viral after expressing that it "warms the cockles of my heart" to work for Singaporeans. He then thanked voters by gesturing the trending Korean

finger-heart on camera. Soon, stans erupted across social media: comments referred to him as "Jamus oppa", while photos compared the politician to the messiah Jesus circulated around Instagram,<sup>30</sup> especially among youths. While it may be encouraging to see the younger generation more involved in local politics, such obsessive idolisation signifies a form of celebritising politicians. This overemphasis on politicians' charisma draws attention away from more critical voting considerations, such as the country's current social and economic landscape, policies proposed, and the manifesto and history of politicians and their parties.



Actual celebrities-turned-politicians such as Austrian-American actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who beat seasoned politicians to become the 38th Governor of California in 2003, testify how the bewitchment of charisma can deeply influence electoral votes. It therefore seems that the criteria of what defines a 'good leader' is increasingly blurred. More specifically, there is a deep concern in downplaying the importance of politicians' competence, where instead they are regarded more as quasi-celebrities than public servants.<sup>31</sup> After all, empirical measures of charisma and successful performance have been found to share only a slight correlation, demonstrating that leaders who forge strong emotional connections with followers do not necessarily bring great and effective changes.<sup>32</sup>

# Conclusion

Social media's ability to amplify alternative discourses provides what many citizens deem as a necessary break from state narratives. But as these platforms increasingly disrupt political communication, there remains inherent challenges that adulterate social media's constructive potential.

The credibility of citizen journalism on social media remains unpredictable, with decontextualized news and misinformation hard to gatekeep. Readers - particularly youths - may draw false conclusions which can ultimately affect electoral voting. The incumbent PAP is however, taking active steps to both monitor misinformation and repress opposition voices through legislations such as POFMA. The party is also attempting to establish greater online influence, though public reception is mixed. Additionally, the over-emphasis on charisma and tendency of celebrating politicians may challenge Singapore as a whole to remain grounded in rational voting.

As such, these manifestations do not make it simple for citizens and politicians, be it incumbent or opposition, to navigate within an increasingly social media oriented political landscape. As Singapore's political actors strategise future narratives in this uncertain digital age, it therefore falls onto the individual in remaining aware of these changing grounds - such that ultimately their vote remains firm in weighted considerations.

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# Emerging Stronger or Retreating Weaker? Responses to COVID-19 and Government Legitimacy

  
*Kellogg's*  
**CORN  
FLAKES**

*The  
Sunshine  
Breakfast*



*Elections*  
**IN THE  
YEAR OF**  
*Covid-19*



article by **Gavin Neo**

# *2020 was a year of radical change,*

with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing states into lockdown and people into their homes. The pandemic didn't just change everyone's daily routines, but it also brought about major political upheaval in several states. However, some governments withstood the crisis better than others, and even gained legitimacy through their swift and effective responses. By analysing several case studies, we can observe how the legitimacy of various democratic and authoritarian governments was affected by their responses to COVID-19.

**Hospitals on high alert for deadly coronavirus**

**Trump declares virus a national emergency**

**STAY AT HOME**

**NYC public schools closed**

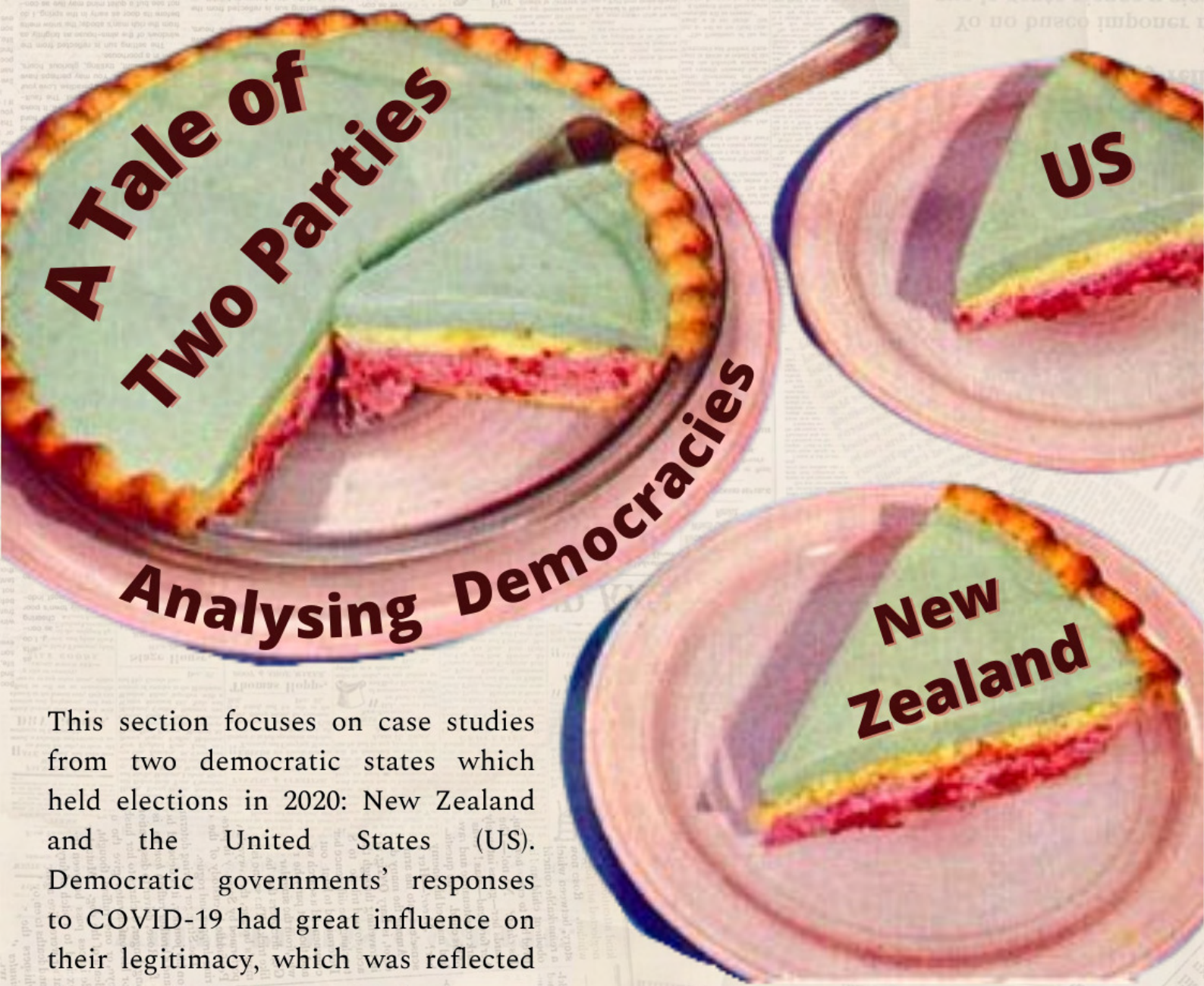
**China locking down cities to stop virus**

**A NEW NORMAL**

**Parliament could be shut for months to tackle virus**

New Zealand's proactive pandemic response not only drew international approval, but also garnered domestic support, shoring up the Labour government's legitimacy through a landslide election victory. Conversely, the Trump administration's ineffective policies against COVID-19 resulted in devastating consequences for American citizens, which undermined his government's popularity and led to losses at the polls.

In Singapore, although the government's initial efforts to contain the virus were successful in protecting the general population, this did not seem to be a major factor in raising its legitimacy. The low community cases were overshadowed by the coronavirus's rapid spread in migrant worker dormitories, which caused citizens to hold doubts regarding the effectiveness of the PAP's pandemic response. Although COVID-19 appeared to pose a major threat to China at first, its government emerged from the crisis stronger than before. It used its successful response to gain legitimacy, especially when compared to some Western states which saw widespread outbreaks.



# A Tale of Two Parties

## Analysing Democracies

US

New Zealand

This section focuses on case studies from two democratic states which held elections in 2020: New Zealand and the United States (US). Democratic governments' responses to COVID-19 had great influence on their legitimacy, which was reflected through their election performances. Governments that responded well were rewarded with convincing victories, while poor performers were booted out of office.

In New Zealand, the government's effective policies to contain the spread of the coronavirus significantly boosted its legitimacy, as evident from the election results. Jacinda Ardern and the Labour party won a landslide victory, attracting voters who were impressed by the government's successful response against COVID-19. However, this overwhelming victory wasn't nearly as predictable

before the pandemic occurred. In early 2020, voter polls showed that Labour's approval had dropped while the centre-right National party's ratings had increased, indicating that the upcoming elections would result in close margins between both parties. It was possible that Ardern would not get re-elected for a second term, as her government had not delivered on many of its promises to reduce poverty and homelessness levels.<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic provided Ardern's government with the opportunity to demonstrate its



effectiveness and gain legitimacy among the populace. It succeeded by reaching out to its populace and communicating in an empathetic manner, garnering high public support for the government's health policies.<sup>2</sup> This ensured high compliance with government policies, contributing to the success of New Zealand's proactive lockdowns in containing the virus. While other countries struggled to keep new clusters from emerging, New Zealand managed to go 100 days without reporting a single case of community spread.<sup>3</sup> The crisis raised public confidence in Labour and Ardern's leadership, as her approval ratings grew significantly ahead of the elections. The successful response reinforced the Labour government's



legitimacy, leading to a historic victory at the polls for Ardern's party, which won a majority in Parliament.

However, not all democratic governments emerged from the COVID-19 crisis with their reputations unscathed. The US saw the rapid spread of COVID-19, due to the Trump administration's slow response to the pandemic, which ultimately undermined his legitimacy. One of the biggest political upsets of 2020 was Donald Trump's loss to Joe Biden during the US presidential elections, with the Democrats gaining control over the House of Representatives and the Senate as well. Biden's victory hinged upon him winning several key states, after many voters' opinions turned against Trump due to the fallout from the pandemic.

Failure to control the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the US's economic downturn, with unemployment rates reaching 14.7%, a record high in the post-World War II era.<sup>4</sup> The Trump administration's slow response not only had adverse economic consequences, but it also directly affected the lives of Americans who contracted the coronavirus. In four months, the US's death toll from COVID-19 had exceeded 100,000 and was the highest in the world, its slow initial response contributing to the major loss of lives.<sup>5</sup> The Trump administration's poor handling of COVID-19 caused him to lose political support.

In areas that experienced high COVID-19 fatality rates, there was reduced support for Trump and Republican candidates.<sup>6</sup> Voter mobilisation was evident through record high voter turnout, with many of the new voters casting their ballots in for Biden, showing their dissatisfaction towards past failures to control the outbreak. The Trump administration's ineffective response to COVID-19 had a direct impact on citizens' lives. Approval for the government decreased, which threatened its political legitimacy. With declining support for Trump and more voters for Biden, the Republican party's legitimacy was severely compromised, and they lost the elections due to their failure to respond adequately to the pandemic.

## Top 5 Countries by COVID-19 Deaths

(May 2020)



New Zealand and the US served as clear examples of successful and unsuccessful responses that affected the incumbent governments' legitimacy. The effectiveness of Singapore's pandemic policies was more subjective, with the successes of its early responses contrasting with the later errors that resulted in outbreaks among the migrant worker population. These factors influenced how Singaporean citizens viewed the government, and the impact on its legitimacy was also

reflected at the polls.

This section analyses Singapore's pandemic response and the subsequent political developments that unfolded. In spite of the PAP's relatively effective response to stopping the spread of COVID-19 among the general population, it did not seem to contribute much to the party's legitimacy, as the controversies from the migrant worker dormitory outbreaks outshined the successes of its initial containment. In fact, its vote share even decreased during the 2020 general elections, and it lost a GRC to the Workers' Party.



## Home (Dis)advantage Analysing Singapore

It was believed that the PAP's track record with handling COVID-19 could help it gain votes at the polls, as the number of community cases was kept low. Singapore's early COVID-19 response gained international praise, especially when other countries were struggling to contain the virus. There were also assumptions that the electorate would be more supportive of the ruling party due to economic uncertainty caused by the outbreak, and they would not attempt to rock the boat by voting for opposition parties.<sup>7</sup> Many thought that Singaporean voters would be more focused on "bread and butter" issues, which was consistent with the PAP's past legitimacy being based on its delivery of consistent economic performance.

However, the early successes in containing the pandemic would be dwarfed by the sheer scale of outbreaks within the migrant worker population.

As the virus spread through dormitories, there were reports of the government ignoring early warnings from NGOs regarding a potential outbreak.<sup>8</sup> This affected citizens' perceptions of the government's response to the pandemic. It seemed that while the general population was protected, migrant workers' welfare was ignored. Public awareness of the migrant workers' poor living conditions grew, and questions were raised over why the government had failed to implement better regulations on dormitory operators. The greatest damage to the government's legitimacy was done when politicians like Josephine Teo addressed the public outcry in an indifferent manner, claiming that no "migrant worker ... has demanded an apology".<sup>9</sup> This statement perpetuated citizens' perceptions that the PAP government and its politicians were out of touch with the common people, and unwilling to admit to their

**"I have not come across one single migrant worker that has demanded an apology."**

— Mrs Josephine Teo on the welfare of migrant workers amidst the COVID-19 outbreak in dormitories.



faults. The handling of the migrant worker outbreaks was less than ideal, and affected the PAP's legitimacy.

The rushed way that the election was executed in response to COVID-19 sharply contrasted with the government's image of being in control over the crisis, which also undermined its reputation for efficiency. The unique circumstances of holding an election during a pandemic resulted in many disagreements on how and when the election should occur. Initially, there were calls from opposition politicians like Tan Cheng Bock to delay the general elections, encouraging the government to avoid holding elections during the pandemic so as to prevent possible outbreaks.<sup>10</sup> However, proposals to postpone elections were rejected, with PAP politicians arguing that doing so was unconstitutional.

**GE2020: PAP  
loses most seats to  
opposition since  
independence,  
vote share falls to  
61.24%**

Experts recommended alternative voting methods such as online or postal voting, to make voting accessible for all demographics, but these measures were not used for the elections due to security and logistical concerns.<sup>11</sup> Thus, vulnerable groups like the elderly also had to vote in person. To allay concerns, the Electoral Department (ELD) made accommodations to reduce risks to these groups, such as having an exclusive voting time for them in the morning. On election day, there were polling centres that experienced extremely long queues, and some had elderly voters who were still waiting for their turn to vote.<sup>12</sup> The rushed nature of the elections, combined with inadequate measures to ensure voter safety, tarnished the government's legitimacy. Some even speculated that long queues at polling stations may have convinced some voters to support the opposition, showing the direct impact that the government's policies had on its legitimacy.

## **COVID-19 response ranking**

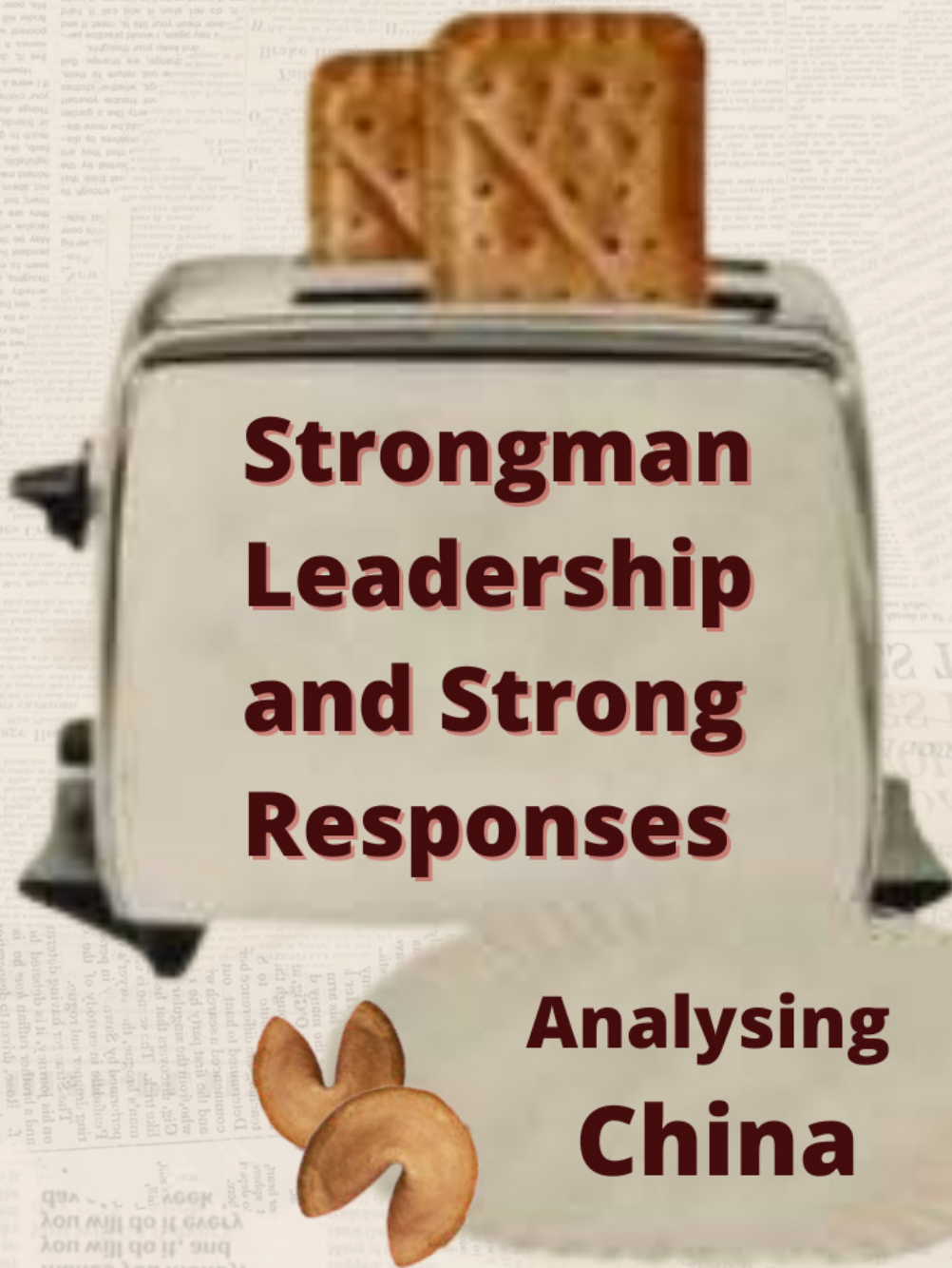




# P A P

**It is no longer just about bread & butter issues.**

At the end of the day, it seemed that the PAP had made miscalculations regarding the amount of legitimacy it had gained from its handling of the pandemic. Instead of making gains in the 2020 general election, it was the PAP's worst performing election in Singapore's history, losing 10 seats to the Workers' Party.<sup>13</sup> However, losing political support due to the COVID-19 pandemic was less of a concern for authoritarian states. China, which was the first state to deal with the virus, even succeeded in using the crisis to its advantage and accumulating legitimacy.



# Strongman Leadership and Strong Responses

## Analysing China

This section looks at the case study of China, an authoritarian state which handled the crisis in an efficient manner despite being the first country to experience the COVID-19 outbreak, emerging from the crisis with a stronger regime and greater legitimacy.

China and its ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), successfully capitalised on the pandemic, turning a potential vulnerability into a source of strength. With the first rapid outbreak in Wuhan, observers argued that the pandemic would be a test of the CCP's effectiveness and legitimacy. Major missteps in handling the outbreak could threaten the party's right to rule, and set the country on a path of greater liberalisation and transition to democracy.<sup>14</sup>

The spread of COVID-19 in Wuhan seemed to be out of control, with its hospitals being unable to cope with the rapid influx of patients. Dissent on Chinese social media emerged, as journalists revealed information on how CCP officials had censored information on the outbreak and delayed measures to address it.<sup>15</sup> However, as China is an authoritarian regime, it could effectively use censorship to quell dissent unlike its democratic counterparts. Moreover, the state was also capable of implementing strict lockdown measures with minimal resistance from citizens, which helped in ending the crisis swiftly.<sup>16</sup>

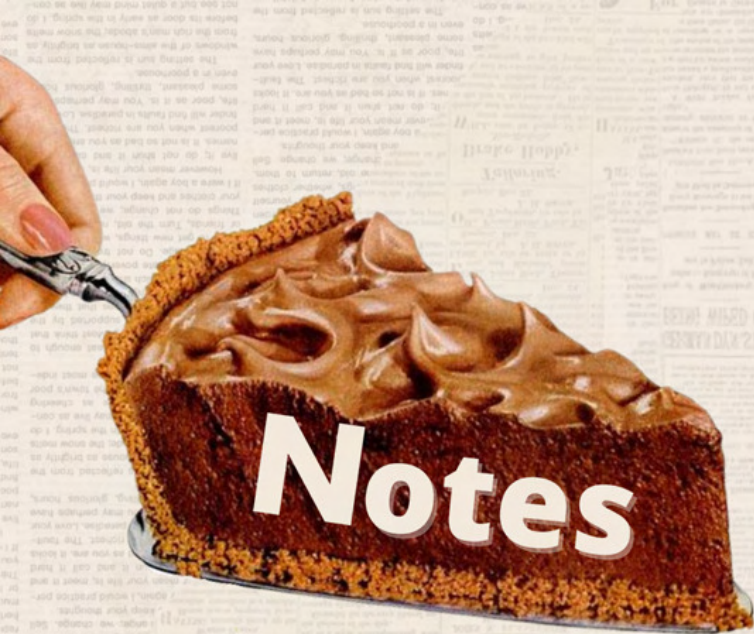
As Western countries like the US and UK also experienced their own outbreaks, China's measures appeared more successful in comparison to their failures to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The Chinese economy even continued to grow during the pandemic, with its GDP increasing by 2.3% at the end of 2020, while other nations experienced recessions.<sup>17</sup> The CCP used this as an opportunity to further boost its legitimacy and prove the efficacy of authoritarianism, while casting doubts on liberal democracy. China was able to effectively use authoritarian mechanisms to control the spread of both COVID-19 and dissenting information against the state, raising its legitimacy among its citizens and even to some foreign observers who were impressed by its success in handling the pandemic.





Based on these case studies, COVID-19 had varying levels of impact on the legitimacy of various regimes. In democratic states, the effects of the pandemic on governments' legitimacy was most clearly illustrated through election results. States that had more successful responses to the crisis were rewarded with high vote shares during elections, while those that had poorer responses lost votes. Some authoritarian states had more effective policies against COVID-19 than democratic states, which increased their governments' legitimacy and demonstrated the effectiveness of authoritarianism in crises. China was a prime example of this, using the pandemic as a chance to increase its legitimacy, and casting doubts on the efficacy of democracy. Back in Singapore, the election results showed that the PAP's relative success in handling the COVID-19 crisis did not seem to be a major factor in raising its legitimacy, with voters being more concerned about political developments. As governments around the world continue to tackle the fallout of the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 on political legitimacy will be felt for a long time.





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It has been over a year since word of a new virus spreading through Wuhan, China reached ears here in Singapore,<sup>1</sup> over a year since the first local case was reported,<sup>2</sup> and over a year since the government called for a circuit breaker.<sup>3</sup> “Coronavirus” has morphed from a vague scientific term to a household one, slung around in casual conversations and jokes, as ubiquitous as “unprecedented times” or “new normal”. It has become a politically-charged term, used by those who believe it to be a hoax<sup>4</sup> as well as those who use it as a shield for racism and bigotry.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the past year has upended the foundations of societies around the world, and through all this, there has been a clinging, desperate hope: once the vaccines arrive, all will be well.

Yet now that various vaccines have been developed, new issues have surfaced: problems with demand outstripping supply, protests and misinformation,<sup>6</sup> and, through it all, deep-rooted inequality that continues to present itself through every stage of this pandemic.<sup>7</sup> This article will present a summary of the race towards developing vaccines, how some countries and regions are dealing with vaccine rollout, and some of the socio-political issues that the vaccination process has highlighted.

ARTICLE BY ISABELLA ONG  
PHOTOGRAPHY AS CREDITED  
DESIGN BY CELESTE KOH



# C O V I D

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# Vaccines:

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# Is The

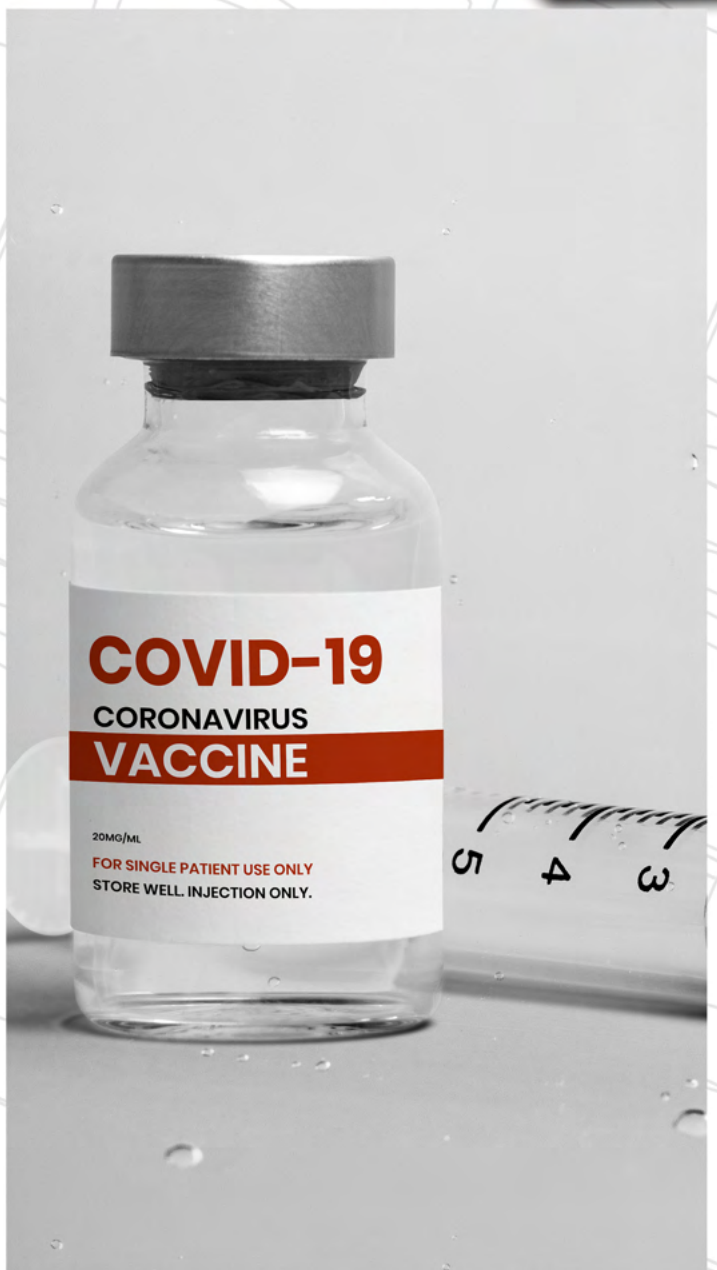
# E n d

# N e a r ?



# VACCINATIONS VACCINATIONS VACCINATIONS

There are several questions and concerns that arose during discussions of the COVID-19 vaccines. With the speed at which developments have progressed and the vast amount of data available, it is easy to get lost in the labyrinth of COVID-19 information. By tapping on different technologies, a myriad of vaccination types have been made available: mRNA, viral vector, and traditional inactivated viruses, among others. Additionally, many have expressed skepticism over the safety of the vaccines, given the short and expedited development period, and there seem to be new concerns emerging almost daily. This section will endeavour to paint a fuller picture of the COVID-19 vaccine race and summarise the currently available information (as of April 20, 2021).



# TYPES OF VACCINES

## Vaccine type

## Company/specific vaccine

## How it works

## Additional information

## Messenger RNA (mRNA)

Pfizer-BioNtech, Moderna

mRNA vaccines work by giving instructions (via mRNA) to cells in the body to make harmless pieces of spike proteins, which are found on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-Cov-2).

Never before been used on humans outside of clinical trials.

## Viral vector

Johnson & Johnson & AstraZeneca-University of Oxford (AstraZeneca)

Viral vector vaccines use genetically engineered versions of other viruses to deliver these instructions instead, where a gene unique to the target virus is added (in the case of COVID-19, this gene instructs cells to make the spike protein).

Holds no threat of causing illness in humans either because of the modifications done to the virus, or because the virus used cannot cause significant ailments and disease in humans. In the case of COVID-19, several companies have used adenovirus, which causes the common cold.<sup>8</sup>

## Protein subunit

EpiVacCorona

Novavax

Protein subunit vaccines contain fragments of the virus, such as the all-important spike protein.

May trigger weaker immune responses, which means that the vaccines often contain chemical agents to stimulate stronger immune responses and often require booster shots. They are also relatively cheap and easy to produce.<sup>9</sup>

## Inactivated/weakened virus

Sinovac

Whole and weakened/inactivated pathogens are injected.

Largely safe as the virus or fragments injected are not able to infect the cells in the body.

## Why spike proteins?

When the body identifies the protein as foreign, it begins to build an immune response and make antibodies, which mimics what would happen in a natural infection. Thus, the body learns to protect against future infections without any risk of the vaccine recipient actually contracting COVID-19.<sup>10</sup>



JESSE COSTA / WBUR

These vaccines have been developed at an unprecedented rate due to several factors, such as prior research, funding, and worldwide cooperation and communication. There have been years of advanced research on both mRNA and viral vector vaccines, and this, combined with research on past viral pandemics (SARS, MERS, etc.) have led to a better foundation for COVID-19 vaccine development to commence upon.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the global crisis led to funding being more widely available than vaccines for other viruses and diseases, with wealthier countries and philanthropists being more willing to devote funds to COVID-19 research. The ready availability of candidates for trials was also immensely useful, as was the sharing of data, such as the viral sequence of SARS-Cov-2, within mere days of the first reported cases of COVID-19 in Wuhan.<sup>12</sup>

Despite all of this, there have still been concerns over side effects caused by the vaccinations. There have been several cases of allergic reactions to the vaccines, with an incidence rate of anaphylaxis (a severe, potentially life-threatening allergic reaction) reported around 1 to 2 per 100,000 doses globally.<sup>13</sup> Norway is investigating the death of 23 elderly recipients of the vaccine, though the Norwegian Medicines Agency maintains that there is no definite connection between the deaths and the vaccine.<sup>14</sup> There have also been concerns regarding the AstraZeneca vaccine leading to blood clots, which has led to many countries changing their vaccination rollout plans. Several countries in Europe are now only administering the AstraZeneca shot to older people, for example, while Denmark has opted to completely suspend the shot.<sup>15</sup> The same issue has occurred with the J&J vaccines, which has led to US officials



recommending the pausing of rollout.<sup>16</sup> However, many maintain that given the current information, the cons associated with contracting COVID-19 are greater than that of the vaccines, and thus people are still urged to go forward with vaccinations.<sup>17</sup> There is also the possibility that there will need to be booster shots for the vaccines. Pfizer has said it is likely that a third booster dose will be needed within 12 months, as initial data only shows effectiveness is retained for at least six months. Additionally, given the swiftly developing and spreading variants, it is possible that there will be need for annual shots.<sup>18</sup>

More pressing than just problems with the vaccines themselves, however, are the

issues with convincing people about the safety and effectiveness of getting vaccinated itself. Australia saw largely peaceful rallies in cities, such as Melbourne and Sydney, though several arrests have been reported.<sup>19</sup> A global survey published in Nature Medicine found that 71.5% of participants reported to be either very or somewhat likely to take a vaccine, and only 48.1% would accept their employer's recommendation to get vaccinated.<sup>20</sup> Mistrust and doubt has fueled much contention over vaccinations, and winning entire populations over seems a long way away.



# THE DEVELOPMENT & PROCESS & ISSUES FACED

## a look at different regions

Different countries and regions have had differing reactions to COVID-19, each drafting and implementing varying policies and strategies. Each region faces its own unique circumstances; one must not solely factor in the acquisition of vaccines by the government, but also the mindset and willingness of the people in receiving vaccines, when analysing these strategies. Deciding on how to acquire and distribute vaccines to their people has been crucial in determining how much of each country's population is currently and slated to be vaccinated.



# The European Union (EU)

The EU, for example, proposed an EU-wide vaccination scheme where the EU itself would be in-charge of acquiring vaccines for member states, so as to help reduce costs and competition between them. However, problems with the supply of vaccines have limited the number of doses that the EU is able to receive, especially considering the unprecedented global demand for the vaccines. Pfizer-BioNtech, for example, had a temporary reduction in deliveries so that the company can expand the capacity of the plant in Belgium, while Moderna has supplied fewer doses to Italy and France than expected. Additionally, AstraZeneca has had production shortfalls at plants in Belgium and the Netherlands, resulting in a dispute between the company and the EU. The company claims that the EU ordered the doses too late, making it difficult to keep up with the demand and make corrections in case issues occurred. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has acknowledged the flaws of the EU's vaccine rollout as well, saying that they were "too optimistic ... and perhaps too confident" in regards to the production and receiving their orders on time.<sup>21</sup>

Due to the shortage of vaccines and the disagreement with AstraZeneca, the EU has announced that it will introduce export controls on vaccines made within the bloc, allowing member states to stop vaccine exports if the company has not fulfilled its contracts with the EU. 92 countries are exempt from the export controls, including donations to Covax, a global initiative aimed at helping

less-developed countries. This move to control exports has drawn criticism, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has called upon wealthy countries to only immunise priority groups, so that vaccinations may be sent elsewhere, with the aim of vaccinating priority groups worldwide first.<sup>22</sup>

In light of this situation, and given that the scheme allows member states to sign agreements for vaccines with companies that have not had agreements with the EU, EU member states have started sourcing for vaccines on their own, with states such as Hungary and Slovakia buying doses from Sputnik, a Russian company. Austria and Denmark have also announced that they are working with Israel to produce vaccinations against mutations of the virus.<sup>23</sup> Germany has even signed a side deal with Pfizer-BioNtech for an extra 30 million doses in September, despite the EU scheme. The European Commission has refused to state whether or not this breaks the terms of the scheme.<sup>24</sup>

This has led to tensions between states and the EU, especially with many European countries seeing resurgent outbreaks of the virus and the vaccines not being distributed as agreed. Many countries are growing impatient with Brussels, and the vaccination scheme has become divisive and shown the cracks within the lauded organisation, instead of showing European unity and might.

# The United Kingdom (UK)

In contrast, the UK has done well in acquiring and rolling out vaccinations, and some have speculated that this might be due to Brexit, leaving the UK more free to independently acquire vaccines. However, others have pointed out that this is not against EU laws, and thus Brexit is a moot point. It seems that the key was not joining the EU vaccination scheme, leaving the government free to sign deals with various companies. Regardless, it is evident that the UK has managed vaccine rollout comparatively well, having administered more than 64 first doses of vaccines per 100 people (as of 20 April).<sup>25</sup> Many attribute this to the vaccine taskforce and the headstart the UK had in signing agreements with companies. It was the first country to approve a vaccine in early December last year, and even before the first COVID-19 case in the UK, the Department of Health and Social Care was reported to have already begun drawing up a plan for mass vaccination.<sup>26</sup> The vaccine taskforce focused on time and effectiveness rather than the price of vaccines, and prioritised availability, choosing Pfizer-BioNTech over Moderna as it had supply chains in Europe. Having signed a contract with AstraZeneca in June 2020, the UK was able to receive their vaccines faster than the EU.

In the rollout of vaccinations, the government has made efforts to secure locations that may be used as vaccination centers. Large buildings, such as theatres and sports halls, and hundreds of high street pharmacies have

been converted into vaccination centres to administer vaccinations. Those in rural areas even have access to mobile vaccination units.<sup>27</sup> Now, the government claims that more than 98% of the people in England live within 10 miles (16 km) of a vaccination centre.<sup>28</sup> This has made it possible for the UK to vaccinate as many people as possible and ensure wide and fair access to the vaccine.

However, the UK still faces problems with COVID-19 and its pre-planned vaccination rollout. There have been complaints about people not being able to book appointments, and there not being enough vaccines in certain areas.<sup>29</sup> A controversial decision was made to delay the administration of the second dose of the vaccine so as to help manage supply, but there has not been enough data regarding the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to confirm the efficacy of the vaccine given such a move.<sup>30</sup> Some communities are also hesitant to receive doses due to the fear of the ingredients in vaccines going against their religious or cultural beliefs.<sup>31</sup>



JOHN CAMERON / UNSPLASH

# Singapore

Singapore has been internationally praised for its pandemic response, especially considering the low number of deaths due to COVID-19, as well as how the cases in the general population were kept largely under control.<sup>32</sup> 23.32% of the population has received at least one dose (as of 20 April), as compared to about 6.67% of the world and 3.68% of Asia.<sup>33</sup> However, it may be noted that this number is considerably lower than the 48.82% in the UK and 39.85% in the US who have received at least one dose, and there are worries that the low numbers of COVID-19 cases has led to a sense of complacency in securing vaccines. This seems to be a trend among countries who have had less cases of COVID-19 or who have the situation under more control, such as New Zealand (2.92%) and Taiwan (0.14%).

Singapore is rolling out the vaccine according to principles, such as ensuring the smooth running of healthcare systems, aiming to reduce mortality, protecting those who are at risk due to less-than-desirable living or potentially risky working conditions, and maximising benefits while minimising harms.<sup>34</sup> This means that vaccinations prioritise groups who are at higher risk, such as healthcare workers and other frontline workers, as well as vulnerable groups such as the elderly, much like in many other countries. Therefore, vaccinations first started with the elderly, with almost 70% of eligible seniors aged between 60 to 69 either receiving their vaccinations or booking appointments for vaccination by 5th April, in comparison to about half of the Singapore residents aged 45 to 59.<sup>35</sup> Those under 45 years old will only be able to book

their appointments from June.

The Singapore government has taken active steps to identify potential concerns regarding the vaccine and mitigate them in an effort to ensure that the public will be willing to get the vaccine. For example, in order to address concerns about serious side effects from the vaccines, the government launched the Vaccine Injury Financial Assistance Programme for the COVID-19 vaccines, which provides financial assistance to those who experience serious side effects due to the vaccines administered in Singapore. Another concern regarding the vaccines would be whether certain religions allowed them, especially given the rather considerable Muslim population in Singapore. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) published a media release on its religious position on the vaccines, stating that it was of the opinion that the vaccines are deemed halal and encouraged Muslims to be vaccinated,<sup>36</sup> which might help ease fears and doubts regarding religious permissibility. These steps helped assuage public fears and encouraged citizens to get the vaccine once it is available to them.

However, not all has been smooth-sailing. People's Power Party (PPP) founder Goh Meng Seng and the alternative news website Singapore Uncensored were issued correction orders by the Ministry of Health (MOH) under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), which is a controversial anti-fake-news law in Singapore. The posts that have been targeted claim that COVID-19 vaccinations caused or

substantially contributed to a doctor having a stroke and the death of an 81-year-old man, which MOH has officially refuted. The Ministry stated that there is no reliable evidence to irrefutably prove that the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines increase the risk of either a heart attack or a stroke, and that it was aware of falsehoods circulating that stated otherwise.<sup>37</sup> Fake news and falsehoods are a significant problem in the modern world, especially with regards to COVID-19 and the vaccinations, and the usage of POFMA to clamp down on misinformation is representative of Singapore's larger approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its efficient system of good governance.



JASON QUAH / ST PHOTO

# New Zealand

New Zealand has also been praised internationally for its COVID-19 response<sup>38</sup> as one of the first countries to get the situation relatively quickly under control. According to the New Zealand government, its vaccine rollout plan seems to be on track,<sup>39</sup> though some have expressed concern about its slow rates of vaccination (as of 20 April, 0.61% have been fully vaccinated). However, the New Zealand government has purchased enough vaccines to vaccinate the entire population, having recently signed an agreement to buy an additional 8.5 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine. This brings their total order of vaccines to 10 million doses, which is enough for 5 million people, more than sufficient for their total population of about 4.9 million.<sup>40</sup>

Yet this does not mean that there is little to worry about, as the EU has imposed export controls on vaccines produced within its blocs, which include the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, as mentioned above. New Zealand ministers have admitted that they are unable to promise that New Zealand's vaccine rollout will not be significantly impacted due to these export controls.<sup>41</sup> This is especially since New Zealand has handled the crisis relatively well in comparison to the EU, which is one of the factors and considerations that the EU has used to decide whether or not the export controls will apply.

Additionally, there are still many who are reluctant to receive a COVID-19 vaccine in New Zealand. A study found that more than a third of respondents were either hesitant or skeptical about the vaccines,<sup>42</sup> which is a significant number as some estimates show that 70 per cent or more need to be vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity.<sup>43</sup> There are several factors that affect how likely one will be sceptical of the vaccine, which include age, race, education level, and gender. Generally, those who are older, more highly educated, richer, and male are more likely to be pro-vaccine, while those who are poorer, less educated, female, and Maori and Pasifika are more likely to be anti-vaccine on the willingness spectrum (Figure 1).<sup>44</sup> Those who are somewhat hesitant, trust social media over mass media and health experts, while those who are outright skeptics, trust only family and friends, which means that reaching out to these groups will require different strategies and approaches. Instead of traditional mass media campaigns or interviews with health experts, social media campaigns and localised community campaigns might be more effective in convincing these groups that the vaccines are safe and beneficial. Being able to convince these groups to take the vaccine is crucial not only because of public health, but also because they are more likely to be from communities such as the Maori and Pasifika, which have historically faced injustice in receiving quality healthcare, and not taking the vaccine will only increase these inequalities, such as a disproportionate disease burden.<sup>45</sup>

## Vaccination reluctance in New Zealand by demographic

European NZ



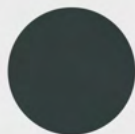
Maori



Pasifika



Asian/other



Enthusiast



Supporter



Hesitant



Skeptic

Figure 1,

Adapted from: Jagadish Thaker, Audience Segmentation of COVID-19 Vaccination Intentions in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Wellington, New Zealand: Massey University, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30203.23841>.



# United States of America (USA)

The US has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and continues to face problems in terms of unfathomable daily cases and deaths due to the virus, with a current total of over 31 million cases and around 67,000 new cases daily (as of 19 April).<sup>46</sup> This has been attributed in part to a sluggish and divided government that was reluctant to take action, leading to the pandemic spiralling out of control,<sup>47</sup> and many looked to the 2020 elections in hopes for change and a new government that would bring salvation and an end to the pandemic. This has, in some part, happened: daily cases are down from about 250,000 cases in January, and President Joe Biden hit his target of 100 million vaccines by his 100th day in office weeks ahead of schedule,<sup>48</sup> with the current number of doses administered reaching above 200 million. President Biden has also successfully pushed a USD1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill through despite opposition from Republicans, who worry that the bill is too expensive and might plunge the US into further, unrecoverable national debt.<sup>49</sup>

However, there are still issues regarding vaccination rollout that continue to afflict the US. Inequality and inequitable distribution, for example, has plagued the US just as it has many other countries. Although the Biden administration has pledged to administer the vaccines equitably to the communities most affected by the pandemic, the most socially vulnerable counties in the US currently have a lower vaccination rate on average than the least vulnerable.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, Michigan, a state that has seen alarming new outbreaks, has been unable to access more vaccinations despite many requests, due to the administration's stance that "the fair and equitable way to distribute the vaccine is based on the adult population by state, tribe and territory"<sup>51</sup> instead of by daily case numbers. However, states such as Mississippi have an overabundance of doses as citizens in those areas are more reluctant to get vaccinated, which has led some to request that extra vaccine supplies be sent to areas with outbreaks instead.

There are arguments that this reluctance to be vaccinated may be due to large rural populations, the political alignments of citizens, and the race and ethnicity of citizens.<sup>52</sup> Some have theorised that the African-American community may be more hesitant about getting vaccinated due to a history of being neglected by the healthcare system as well as past wrongdoing by the government. However, studies have shown that Black people are in fact more likely to want to get the vaccine than the general population<sup>53</sup>, and the reason behind less black people getting the shot may be due to a lack of access as many live far from vaccination sites. This has also been reflected by the poor and elderly who find it difficult to travel to get their vaccinations, leading to many opting for the single-dose J&J vaccine instead, which might prove problematic in the future as the J&J vaccine has been temporarily paused in the US. On the other hand, political alignment seems to be a driving force behind hesitancy. Republican states seem to be facing a greater pushback from citizens, with 49% of Republican men saying that they do not want to be vaccinated, in comparison to 30% of all adults in the US (Figure 2).<sup>54</sup>

"If a vaccine is made available to you, will you choose to be vaccinated?"

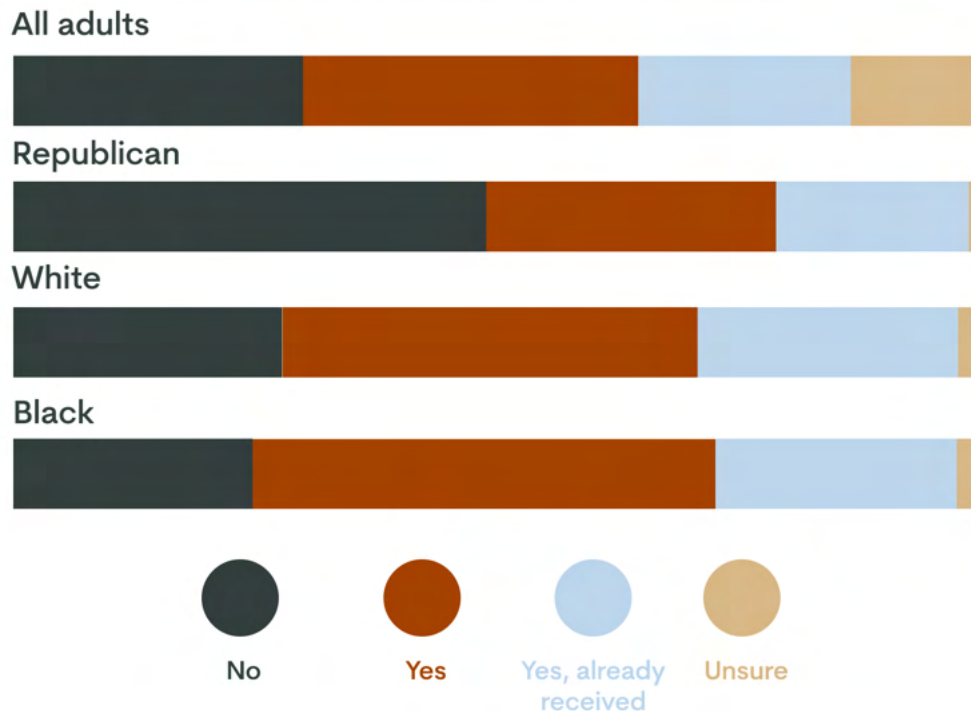


Figure 2,

Adapted from: Juana Summers, "Little Difference In Vaccine Hesitancy Among White And Black Americans, Poll Finds," npr, March 12 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-up-dates/2021/03/12/976172586/little-difference-in-vaccine-hesitancy-among-white-and-black-americans-poll-find>.

This has been attributed to social media misinformation as well as mixed messaging by government officials, such as relaxing of COVID-19 restrictions, which contradicts the urgency of getting vaccinated.

In light of this, some officials have changed their vaccine hesitancy focus to include white Republicans who are hesitant to get vaccinated, instead of focusing solely on African-Americans and Hispanics. It is important that the messages of vaccine safety and importance are given by trusted members of the various communities, such as doctors and religious leaders, and are crafted such that fears are eased without being disparaged or ignored. In order to reach out to the wide variety of individuals, messages need to be communicated through a wide variety of methods, while ensuring the messages stay coherent and united.



All in all, different countries face different difficulties and circumstances. The issues one country faces differs from that of its counterparts, even if they may be close geographically. Additionally, governments face the challenge of not only procuring vaccines, but also of administering them, a problem exacerbated by some citizens' distrust in the vaccines and their governments. Despite all of this, it is of paramount importance to remember that vaccines are still the crucial key to ending this pandemic. Even though acquiring and administering vaccines is not going as smoothly as hoped, with new issues cropping up and historical inequalities being once again revealed, vaccinations will still be and is humanity's only way forward out of this prolonged distance.

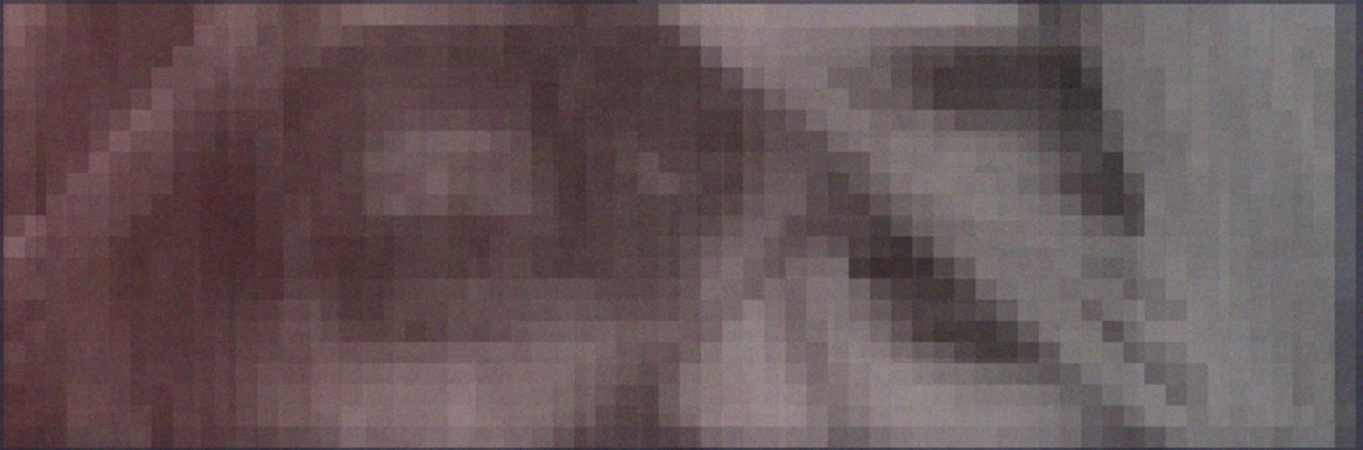


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community contribution

# Empowerment of Women in Politics

ARTICLE BY Lim Jiayi  
DESIGN BY Audrey Ng

Politicians fundamentally represent the interests of their people, who may hail from very diverse groups. This can be seen from the variety of gender identities and people of different races and faiths. On the other hand, politicians need to sufficiently address the peoples' needs, which is crucial to the functioning of society, in turn making it a better place for everyone to live and grow in. More challengingly, people of different groups encounter their own unique challenges and often lack a voice that represents their views and needs. As such, the severity of certain challenges needs to be recognised and more effective action can be taken by listening to those with first-hand insights of these challenges and their root causes. Therefore, the adequacy of political representation of all social groups is a highly contentious issue. As of now, people are unsure if the needs of such groups are properly being met by current politicians. However, it is also debatable whether individuals from these diverse groups are sufficiently competent to hold office.

Over the past years, movements have even sprung up to encourage a greater range of diverse people to step up. However, this has led to debates about whether insisting on diverse representation will dilute the ability of politicians. In fact, people have begun to worry about how politics will be disorganised and unfocused when there are too many representatives clamouring to make their voices heard.

I will specifically be discussing the involvement of women, as countries still have a long way to go in empowering the many other diverse groups that exist. Is it even important to empower more women to enter politics? Or is the majority gender in politics, men, adequately able to accurately represent the views of the entire society? As it stands, men are by far the largest and most represented group within the political sphere. Certain statistics by UN Women indicate that women in executive government positions, national parliaments, and local governments are greatly outnumbered by men.<sup>1</sup> The World Economic Forum has also revealed alarming statistics of gender inequality through its Global Gender Gap report. According to the current rate of progress for reducing gender inequality, another 108 years is needed for the gap to be closed. While gender gaps exist in various aspects of society, the political empowerment gap is observed to be the largest amongst other factors, such as health and survival, and educational attainment.<sup>2</sup> Yet ironically, women are also receiving so much more gender equality opportunities, which is a testament to their abilities. Despite these abilities, a representation of them in politics is still severely lacking.





Fig 1. According to findings by World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report it will take 108 more years to close the gender gap, especially in the political empowerment dimension.

# Competency: Key to Leadership?

It is widely believed that competency, rather than one's physical characteristics, should determine whether they should be allowed to represent their countries.<sup>3</sup> These sentiments have been reflected by the universal unpopularity over the concept of introducing quotas in politics. By introducing quotas aimed at simply having sufficient political representation for a particular group, it brings into question whether these representatives made it into politics out of their own merits or simply out of a sheer act of tokenism. Thus, meritocracy is a rather popular conception in many countries, as people believe that politicians should be elected due to their abilities.<sup>4</sup> Competent leaders are generally identified by leadership competencies such as initiative, charisma, and action-taking.<sup>5</sup> Hence, according to these traits, gender should not be a consideration for whether someone should be selected to be a representative in politics.

While it can be true that competency and merit are keys to effective political leadership, I would still argue that variety in political representation can offer different perspectives, even though there are arguments against achieving variety at the expense of competent leaders. As mentioned, these perspectives are vital to highlighting challenges that the different groups face in society and in shaping actions that can be taken. Competency is something that most are capable of. As discussed previously, gender equality statistics have outlined how women with access to more opportunities have made good use of them. Hence, the question of competency ought not be causing the gender discrepancy we see in politics, unless something else is causing a difference in competencies in the first place.

## Root Causes

The root causes that have led women into becoming a minority in the first place can be attributed to historical developments and the subsequent disadvantages faced by women. Historically, politics has been dominated by men. This was termed as 'patriarchy', where society is largely ruled by men and the women are held to be more subservient.<sup>6</sup> In essence, men have had a 'head start' when it comes to political representation. Men were traditionally seen to be stronger and more capable of leadership. Hence, the potential of women and other groups were untapped, or worse, suppressed.<sup>7</sup> Patriarchy subsequently devolved to a considerably less severe case of male dominance within politics, where women are given opportunities to enter political office, but may still be overshadowed by the male majority. This likely occurred as women lacked access to education in society, due to poverty or cultural values, in the past.<sup>8</sup> Things have definitely progressed since then, due to the realisation that the oppression or limiting of women could not be sustained for long. While there has certainly been a wide empowerment in women's rights, there still has not been considerable progress in many countries.

# Necessity for Developments

This article will argue that new developments are fundamental to braving the odds. New developments can be a foreign concept, especially for societies that have eased into the traditional ways of operation. When society is running like clockwork with existing systems, it can be difficult to accept that some things can be improved. This aversion to reform is known as a status quo bias.<sup>9</sup> The comfort that comes with settling for current measures will lessen society's ability to adapt to future challenges. It will also make them unreceptive of new systems that could improve the current situation. We need it in this era where rapid developments are happening in the world. There must be opportunity for developments to take place. Even if the world is seemingly functional, we can do better. Even if such these developments may cause problems at the start, we have to let them gradually take effect, for positive effects to be seen.

Despite the patriarchal order, female representation in politics has increased. The women's suffrage movement was a step towards future political change.<sup>10</sup> It paved the way for an unprecedented movement on gender equality. Despite that, more can still be done. As Michelle Bachelet, the head of the UN Women said, "For me, a better democracy is (one) where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect, but to be elected." While the movement has increased society's receptiveness to the women vote, it is still considerably far less receptive to women taking office.

Now, I will be exploring case studies of countries that have a large group of empowered women being politically involved.

"For me, a better democracy is (one) where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect, **but to be elected.**"





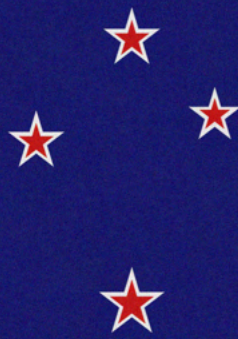
# Singapore

There is still somewhat of a gender gap in political representation in Singapore. As of 2021, a record number of 29% of the elected seats in Singapore go to women.<sup>11</sup> This still shows a rather considerable amount of male domination. Despite this domination, it is important to note that elected seats do not have to comprise of 50% men and 50% women. As Member of Parliament Rahayu mentioned, empowerment should not be forced through percentages and numbers.

Moreover, the White Paper on Women's Rights and Issues that is currently being drafted is still highly commendable.<sup>12</sup> However, more can be done in empowering and encouraging women. The lack of women stepping up to run for office has been attributed to the characteristics of Singapore society, where people are unwilling to put themselves out there.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, some of Singapore's problem does not lie in gender inequality but rather, a lack of empowerment. However, Law Minister K. Shanmugam has also noted that

there are fewer women in leadership due to having to juggle family and work commitments.<sup>14</sup> This could be a sign of gender inequality being a root cause, as the phenomenon suggests that family commitments may not be balanced equally between men and women itself. Still, the Minister noted that the government can only encourage a mindset change within society, which is very difficult to do so.

Hence, there is much that Singapore can learn from other countries that are making progress in increasing female representation through empowerment and subsequently, improving gender equality to a greater level.



# New Zealand

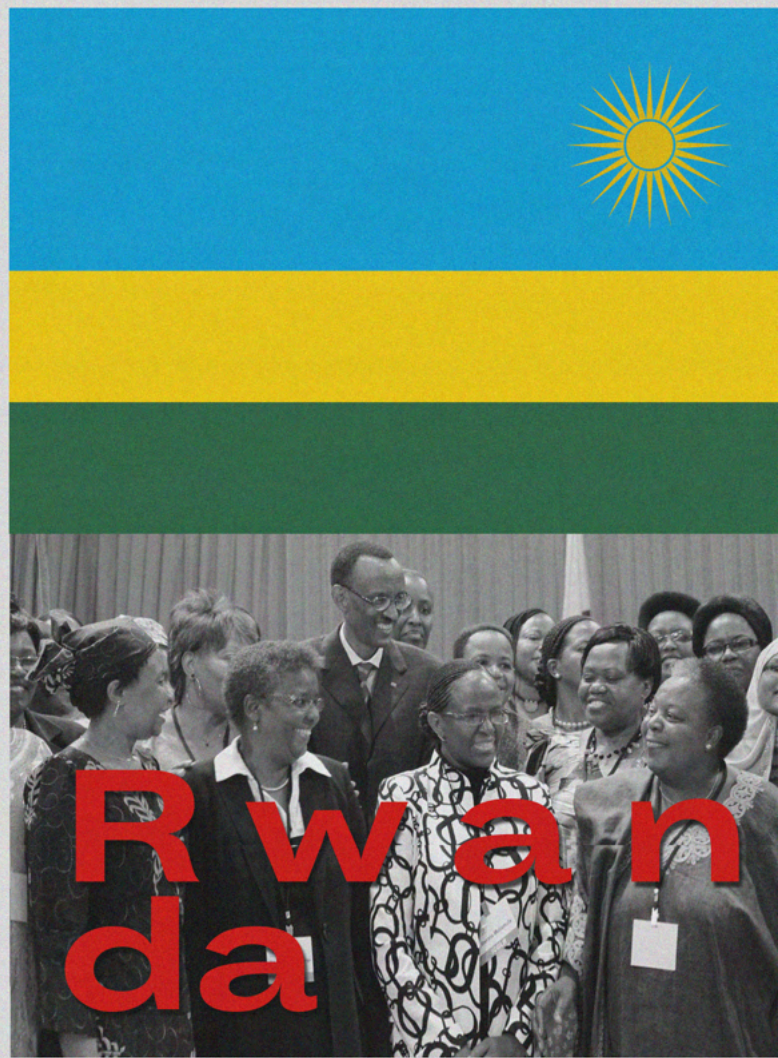
In recent years, a shining example of progressive and inclusive governmental policies has been New Zealand. Jacinda Ardern, its third female Prime Minister, has received worldwide praise for the policies she has proposed to implement. Some of these policies are also benefitting women far more, compared to past ones. For instance, free sanitary products are going to be provided in all schools to beat ‘period poverty’, a problem where female students are unable to afford such necessities.<sup>15</sup> Besides women, other minority groups are also benefitting. Ardern also appointed Nanaia Mauta, a female Maori, as foreign minister. Mauta is part of an indigenous group, which has traditionally not been involved much in the governance of the country.<sup>16</sup> New Zealand’s parliament is on track to becoming one of the most diverse in the world. Here, we can see that the incorporation of more women has created changes in society that is improving it beyond its existing structures.

These policies were implemented rather easily and have been very popular with the people. They have benefitted society as a whole through encouraging more

diverse views in politics, mitigating the effects of poverty, and encouraging equality as a whole. Such a change has been attributed to New Zealand’s socially progressive culture. It was the first country where women secured the right to vote.<sup>17</sup> Evidently, New Zealand has done well in undergoing transgressions away from the rest of the world. By overcoming the conventional traditions and beliefs of the international world, it was able to create a society where its policies are envied by many.

Despite this clear example of female empowerment, this does not necessarily lead to complete gender equality. While Ardern is clearly an empowered woman, New Zealand is still experiencing difficulties over gender inequality. There is still a gender pay gap of around 9.5% in 2020 and the unemployment statistics indicate a higher number of women than men.<sup>18</sup> Despite its problems with gender inequality, it is still considered one of the leading countries in the world in equality, being ranked 6th in the world. Therefore, we can observe that empowerment has progressed the country, which is a positive step in the right direction.

Rwanda's government largely consists of women, forming 62% of the government. Rwanda's situation could be considered a stroke of chance, as the genocide paved the way for women to take charge of the nation.<sup>19</sup> Positive effects from such representation have been seen. Rwanda's education system is considered one of the most developed in Africa. However, it is also a case where an increase in female representation is not necessarily correlated to stronger governance. Despite there being more women in government, the society still holds a regressive mindset towards gender equality.<sup>20</sup> Social structures in rural areas also prevent policies from taking effect. For example, a culture of marrying women off at a young age prevents them from getting a proper education.<sup>21</sup> We realise here, once again, that society itself has to develop alongside its government.



Kamala Harris' recent election as US Vice-President has also affected several policies significantly. She comes from a diverse background, being the child of immigrants and partly from minority races.<sup>22</sup> She has overcome much in a nation that still has anti-immigration sentiments and some form of adherence to traditional gender roles.<sup>23</sup> She has also shattered the 'glass ceiling', becoming the first female US Vice-President. Her story has inspired many to believe in the USA as a place where opportunities await.<sup>24</sup> Such inspiration will no doubt create a long-term change in society's mindset, where they will start believing in ideas. As for whether Harris' leadership will bring about positive changes, only time will tell.

Many factors will come into play when it comes to societal progress. Increasing female representation is only a part of many steps. Evidently, from these case studies, an increased female representation has brought about many positive changes for society. Women's views have been more adequately represented. Additionally, the unique characteristics of women that set them apart from men has also allowed them to develop actions that tackle different issues. For example, as Nydia Ngiow, a senior director at public policy consultancy BowerGroupAsia noted, "female politicians are known to be more inclined towards engaging on topics outside the traditional bread-and-butter concerns like the economy". Therefore, gender-specific characteristics can influence one's affinity towards certain issues in society.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, even though an increase in female representation has generally brought about positive changes, we must still recognize that the changes can only result from competent female representatives and a society that is receptive to these changes.

## Necessity for Improving Competencies

While correlation between increased female representation and benefit to society may sometimes be weaker, I still argue that female representation can only be more effective when there is proper education and training, both for society and the women-in-charge.

Here, developed nations have a part to play in such changes. Economically-developed countries possess resources to train and educate other nations to become more knowledgeable and progressive.<sup>26</sup> They have valuable resources in the form of passionate activists, advocates, and humanitarians, all of whom are speaking up for greater empowerment of women. Improving societies is not something a single country can do alone. In the age of globalisation, boundaries are almost invisible. Countries are collaborating far more than before. When countries are able to impart their expertise to the rest of the world, they would be able to improve the world in general. When countries specialise in imparting their progressive views and their expertise in education and development, they will be able to

utilise globalisation to achieve impact in the rest of the world.

Women have to be further empowered to be allowed to represent their countries, and for society to accept them for their choices. Plenty of organisations are working towards this cause. For example, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems is strongly advocating for an increased representation.<sup>27</sup> Women have created changes by representing the voice of a group that they can understand. They can represent their interests far better than a third party who does not have first-hand insight into their challenges. For example, women can represent their experiences with the gender pay gap or discriminatory hiring against mothers. While men may be aware of such challenges, they may be less sure of the solutions that women would like to see. Changes can be seen from the greater awareness and advocacy against challenges that women face. There have also been positive changes such as increased spending on healthcare and education.<sup>28</sup>

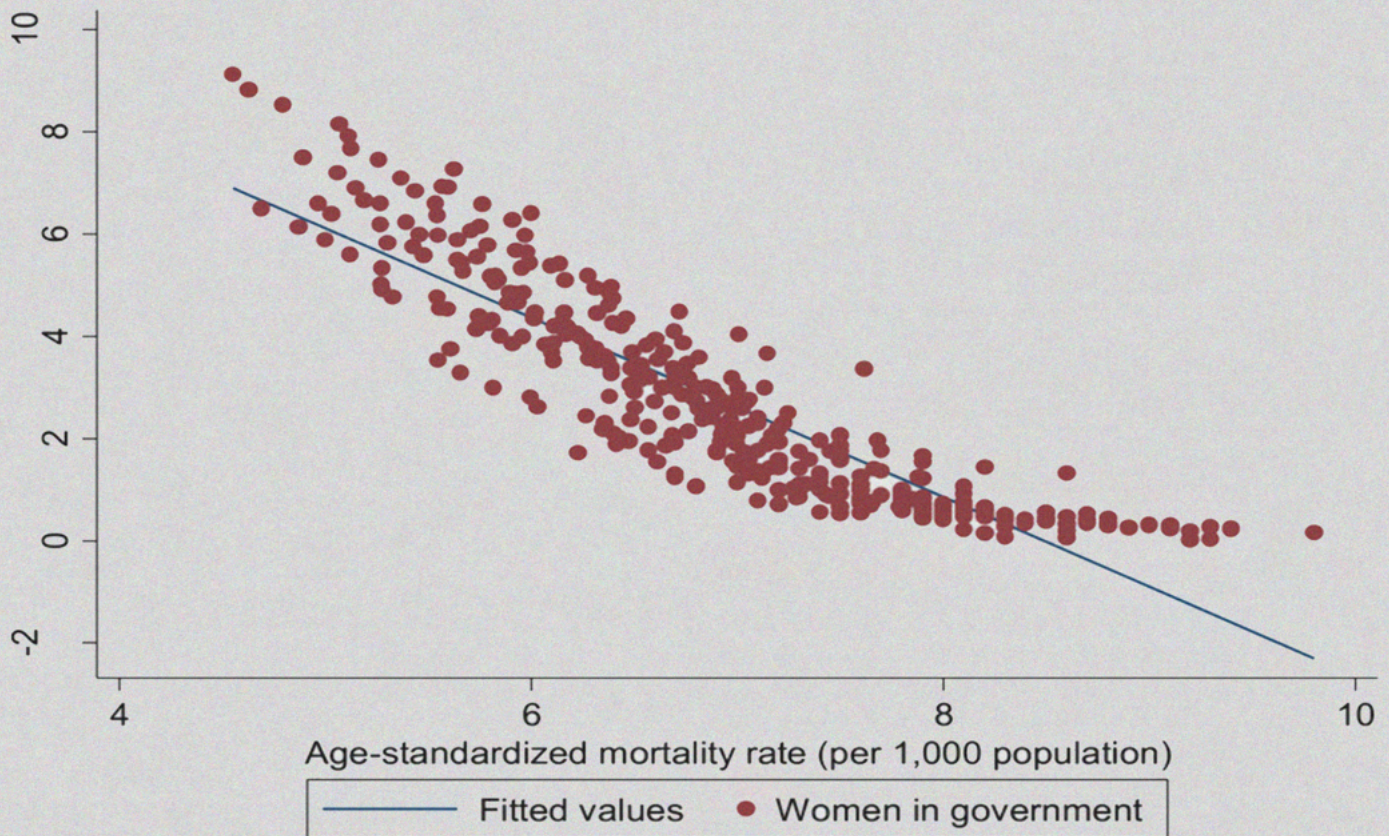


Fig 2. More women in power correlates with a decreased population mortality rate. More women in government also sparks change by:



helping to push for substantive advancement of women's rights



increasing spending on healthcare and education



an increased tendency to work in more collaborative and bipartisan ways.

Even if opportunities are abundant, it is a matter of whether every person is provided the empowerment and support by society to pursue their interests to represent their people. Unless we embrace change in the political realm, we cannot see developments taking effect from ideas we thought were impossible.

Other than increased representation of women, societies should also look towards doing far more than simply including women. We could extend ourselves to empowering other diverse groups such as transgenders or indigenous peoples. However, to start with women would be a start to a greater

movement. Women are the largest 'minority' group that need empowerment. When a minority group is empowered, other smaller groups will follow suit. As discussed previously, empowering women is but a step towards a greater movement in the future.

To conclude, women have overcome so much to receive the right to vote. It is surely equal if they are supported to serve in politics well. Positive changes such as a representation of more diverse perspectives and greater gender equality will surely arise, given time and society's receptiveness.



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