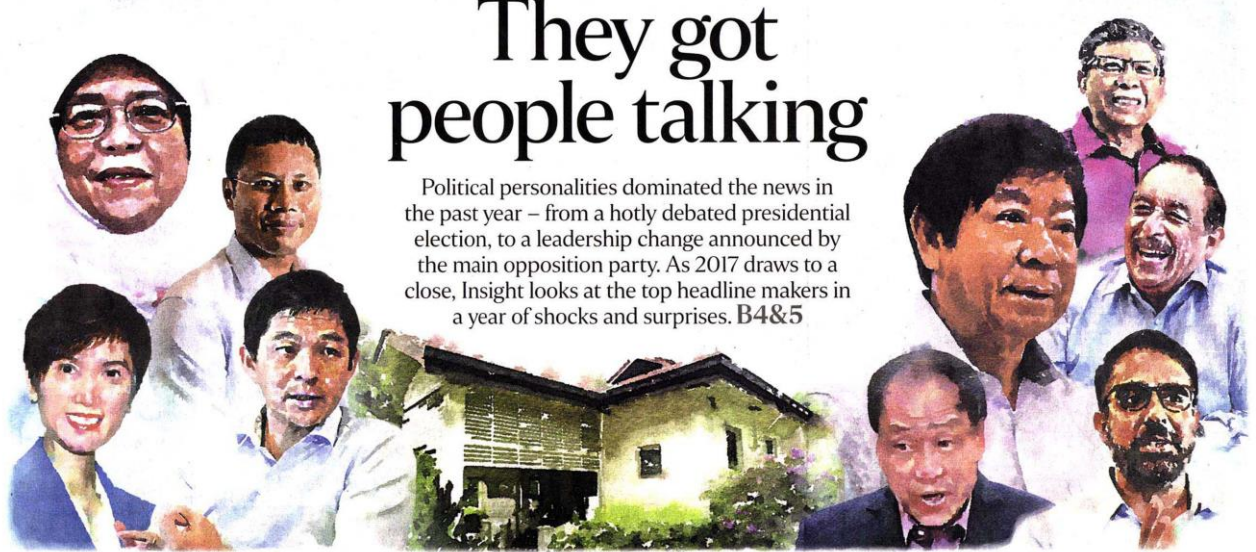


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They got people talking

Political personalities dominated the news in the past year – from a hotly debated presidential election, to a leadership change announced by the main opposition party. As 2017 draws to a close, Insight looks at the top headline makers in a year of shocks and surprises. B4&5



Riding the waves of change



Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh

The year 2017 was one of shocks, surprises and historic firsts. The personalities who found themselves in the political headlines rode the waves of the past year, leaving their own mark on developments. As the dust settles on the year, Insight looks back at the top headline makers.

2 **Khaw Boon Wan: Mr Fix-It gets sinking feeling**

He was made Transport Minister in 2015, after a string of successes in health and housing. But the unprecedented spate of public transport incidents this year may have derailed Mr Khaw Boon Wan's reputation as Mr Fix-It.

In October, rainwater flooded an MRT tunnel between Bishan and Braddell stations, disrupting service on the North-South Line for 20 hours and affecting over 230,000 commuters.

Mr Khaw offered a public apology and last month, delivered a ministerial statement to address MP's questions on the rail network's first flooding incident. Barely a week later, a train collision at Joo Koon station injured 38, prompting another apology.

The position of Transport Minister is known for being a hot seat portfolio. Indeed, some observers point to it ending the political careers of former ministers Raymond Lim, who left the Cabinet after the 2011 polls, and Lui Tuck Yew, who resigned from politics in 2015.

Mr Khaw, who is also Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure, is feeling the strain, too, going by this Facebook post this month: "At 65, I feel like 70 after the recent train incidents."

IN HIS OWN WORDS:
 Last month, he said incidents such as the collision and flooding "shattered" commuters' confidence, "but it has happened, and we have to get over it and regain the public's confidence, which means back to the same old job: We have to raise reliability".

3 **Tan Chuan-jin: Move that shocked pundits**

The vacant post of Speaker of Parliament found a "shock" replacement in Mr Tan Chuan-jin.

Talk over who would succeed Madam Halimah Yacob had thrown up the possibility of senior backbenchers, junior ministers or deputy speakers.

Instead, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in September that he would be nominating Mr Tan - a Cabinet minister of four years who was touted as a core member of the fourth-generation political leadership. Mr Tan had the "temperament and personality" for it, said PM Lee.

The new post meant Mr Tan, 48, would have to step down as Minister for Social and Family Development. Some saw it as a demotion, as the role comes with a lower salary and without policy-making responsibilities. They thought that Mr Tan's high-flying political career had been grounded.

Others point out that as head of Parliament, Mr Tan is now holding a higher office, protocol-wise, than a Cabinet minister. And his role will become more important with more opposition members in Parliament. Changes to the Constitution ensure that the next Parliament will have at least 12 opposition MPs.

IN HIS OWN WORDS:
 Mr Tan told Insight: "I've embraced every opportunity that I've been given - and the role as Speaker of Parliament is no exception. It has been a meaningful experience so far, and I look forward to helping Singaporeans better understand what we do in Parliament."

4 **Heng Swee Keat, Ong Ye Kung, Chan Chun Sing**

As Singapore ponders the hot political question of who its fourth prime minister will be, these three men have emerged as clear front runners for the job.

Over the past year, what they did and said and the responsibilities they were given were closely parsed for possible clues on who the eventual leader might be. Certainly they have become more visible; for instance, Mr Heng concluded a trip to China during which he made a wide-ranging speech on the challenges that Singapore and China face; Mr Chan moved changes to the Elected Presidency in Parliament, while Mr Ong assumed leadership of public service innovation and the Government's Chinese community liaison group.

Pundits sat up when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mentioned only the three by name at the People's Action Party convention last month - when he spoke of the work being done by the Future Economy Council - and took note of the sequence in which he cited them (for the record: Mr Heng, Mr Chan and Mr Ong).

With few, if any, the wiser of what the state of play is, there has been some overreading into comments by the protagonists. In October, when asked at a dialogue whether he wanted the job of prime minister, Mr Chan said "all of us have to be prepared to do the job when called upon". The headline by wire agency Reuters quoted Mr Chan as saying "he is prepared to become the next PM if called upon" - which the Ministry of Communications and Information took issue with. Reuters subsequently amended its headline.

5 **The Lee family: The house in the House**

For a month, the dispute between Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his two younger siblings over the fate of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's home at 38, Oxley Road, had the nation riveted.

The feud erupted into the public sphere on June 14 when Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Dr Lee Wei Ling issued a six-page statement on Facebook accusing their elder brother of abusing his powers in a bid to prevent the demolition of the house.

Five ministers weighed in as allegations piled up from the younger Lees on a number of issues, including supposed conflicts of interest and claims of a "shadowy" ministerial committee purportedly acting on PM Lee's bidding.

The charges of abuse of power were the subject of an emotional two-day debate in Parliament in July, in which 36 MPs and ministers spoke.

Soon after, the younger Lees released a joint statement on Facebook saying they welcomed their brother's desire to settle their quarrel in private.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:
 Dr Lee and Mr Lee said in their joint statement: "(We) do not wish to see Singapore embroiled in a never-ending public argument... It is up to the Government, and the people of Singapore, to decide whether and how to hold Lee Hsien Loong to account."

Asked about his relationship with his siblings, PM Lee told CNBC in October: "Perhaps one day when emotions have subsided, some movement will be possible. These things take time."

10 **Huang Jing: Foreign meddling rears its head**

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy academic Huang Jing was booted out of Singapore this year after he was accused of being an "agent of influence" for an unnamed foreign government - the first publicly-known case of its kind in nearly two decades.

The Ministry of Home Affairs announced in August that Dr Huang and his wife, both China-born American citizens, would be permanently banned. The professor, who had lived here for nine years, was said to have worked with intelligence organisations and agents from a foreign country to influence Singapore's foreign policy and public opinion.

Dr Huang, 60, whose views on China and foreign policy issues were regularly sought by organisations and the media, and his wife had their permanent residency cancelled. Their appeal to remain in Singapore was rejected, and the couple left in September.

In the months since, several political leaders have - without referring to the episode - stressed the need to be vigilant against foreign influence. Among them was Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing, who spoke at a constituency event about the importance of staying united, despite attempts by those outside Singapore to impose their influence.

IN HIS OWN WORDS:
 Dr Huang told the South China Morning Post in August: "It's nonsense to identify me as an agent of influence for a foreign country. And why didn't they identify which foreign country they're referring to? Is it the United States or China?"

11 **Radicalised, and from Singapore**

Terror group ISIS this year put a Singaporean face to its propaganda.

Megat Shahdan Abdul Samad, 39, an odd-job worker who left to find work in the Middle East but ended up fighting on ISIS' front lines, anchored a 3 1/2 minute clip that surfaced online in September.

Sitting astride a truck loaded with artillery rounds, Shahdan - identified in the video as "Abu Uqayl from Singapore" - praises East Asian fighters, calls for extremists to join the terror group's efforts in East Asia or the Middle East, and challenges to a fight Britain's Prince Harry, a former Apache pilot in the British army, who visited Singapore in June.

Analysts warn that the English-language video signals the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's sharpened focus on South-east Asia - as it loses ground in the Middle East.

There has been a steady trickle of Singaporeans detained here for terror-related activities in recent years. Five radicalised Singaporeans were nabbed under the Internal Security Act in 2017, including infant-care assistant Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari - who in June became the first woman detained here for radicalism. Between 2007 and 2014, 11 were arrested, while the number of cases in 2015 and 2016 spiked to 18.

IN HIS OWN WORDS:
 In the video, Shahdan challenges Prince Harry: "Why don't you come here and fight us if you are man enough? So we can send you and your Apaches to hellfire."

12 **Kishore Mahbubani: Small states, big fuss**

Muddled, mendacious and indeed dangerous. Questionable intellectually. Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean Kishore Mahbubani found himself on the receiving end of these sharp words when his commentary on lessons small states can draw from the Qatar diplomatic crisis set off a rare public sparring.

Former foreign minister K. Shanmugam - now Law and Home Affairs Minister - and veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan took issue with what Prof Mahbubani said was an eternal rule of geopolitics: "Small states must behave like small states."

In his Straits Times commentary, the LKY school don said Qatar had mistakenly believed it could interfere in affairs beyond its borders because of its wealth, and drew comparisons between this and Singapore's stance on the South China Sea dispute. The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew had commented "openly and liberally on great powers", noted Prof Mahbubani, 69, who was Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations. But Singapore is unlikely to have another globally respected statesman like Mr Lee, and must change its behaviour significantly, he said. Mr Bilahari reacted, saying: "Singapore did not survive and prosper by being anybody's tame poodle."

IN HIS OWN WORDS:
 "In the jungle, no small animal would stand in front of a charging elephant, no matter who has the right of way, so long as the elephant is not charging over the small animal's home territory," wrote Prof Mahbubani in his piece. He retires as dean this month.

13 **Salleh Marican & Farid Khan: No contest**

For these two businessmen, the race to the Istana was over before it even began.

Mr Salleh Marican, 68, and Mr Farid Khan, 61, had made their intention to stand in the presidential election known in June, months before Madam Halimah Yacob put rumours about her presidential bid to rest by standing.

But the early birds - who had already formed their campaign teams and battle plans, with Mr Khan spending \$200,000 in preparation for his presidential bid and Mr Marican, \$90,000 - were deemed ineligible to contest the election by the Presidential Elections Committee. Neither Mr Khan, the chairman of a marine services firm, nor Mr Salleh, the chief executive of a property company, had helmed a company with \$500 million in shareholder equity for the most recent three years, a key threshold required for private-sector candidates.

Their disqualification meant that only Madam Halimah was given the green light to contest the election reserved for candidates from the Malay community, having qualified on account of having held the post of Speaker of Parliament since 2013.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:
 Mr Khan, chuckling, told The Straits Times in September: "No more politics for me."
 Meanwhile, Mr Marican hopes to stand in the next presidential contest if he can meet the \$500 million criteria then: "I believe in second chances. I believe I will give myself a second chance."

1 Tony Tan & Halimah Yacob:
 Twists and turns on road to the Istana

Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam – who in 2011 won Singapore's most hotly contested presidential election by a slim margin – has left the building. Now, the highest office in the land is occupied by Madam Halimah Yacob, 63, who this year won what could be the country's most controversial presidential election. Dr Tan, a former deputy prime minister and long-time PAP MP, beat three other contenders, emerging victorious only after a recount. He won by around 7,400 votes. The 77-year-old served as a unifying figure during an eventful six years that included the death of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, the nation's Golden Jubilee and its first Olympic gold medal. After his term came to an end on Aug 31, he was appointed director and special adviser at Singapore sovereign wealth fund GIC, and honorary patron and distinguished senior fellow at Singapore Management University, an institution he

had a hand in planning for as DPM. Taking his place is a former PAP colleague, who went from the Speaker's chair to the Istana. Madam Halimah's name was on everybody's lips when the Government last year announced that the next presidential election would be reserved for Malay candidates. But she kept mum until this August, when she announced during an event in Marsiling ward that she would be leaving her party and political posts to stand for the election. Madam Halimah went on to win in a walkover, becoming the country's first woman head of state and its first Malay president in more than 47 years. But the controversies surrounding the election – from the no-contest to the constitutional amendment that saw the race open only to Malay candidates to ensure minority representation – put a dampener on these historic firsts. Since then, Madam Halimah has



President Halimah Yacob greeting visitors at the Istana. Since taking office, one of her initiatives has been to make the Istana more accessible. ST FILE PHOTO

moved out of the Yishun flat she had hoped to continue living in, due to security concerns. She has been busy putting her own stamp on the presidency, reaching out to people on the margins of society and pledg-

ing to make the Istana more accessible. **IN THEIR OWN WORDS** Dr Tan told Insight: "It was indeed an honour and privilege for me to

PRESIDENT FOR EVERYONE

Although this is a reserved election, I am not a 'reserved' president.



MADAM HALIMAH YACOB on her pledge to be a president for all Singaporeans, after she was elected unopposed.

serve as the seventh President of the Republic of Singapore. After completing my six-year term, my wife and I left the Istana with fond memories and much gratitude to Singaporeans for their support and encouragement for the initiatives launched during my presidency."

Madam Halimah told Insight: "This year has been a significant one for me. I am honoured to be inaugurated as the eighth President of Singapore. I am humbled to be given this opportunity to work with all Singaporeans to build a more caring and inclusive society together."

NEXT WEEK'S INSIGHT: 5 hot-potato political issues from the past year and whether they will continue to matter in 2018



6 Desmond Lee & Josephine Teo: A step up

The frontbench of tomorrow is taking shape, with the minting of two new full ministers this year. One is Mrs Josephine Teo, whose appointment marks a milestone: For the first time, Singapore has two women who are full ministers in the Cabinet. The 49-year-old is now Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, as well as Second Minister for Manpower and Home Affairs. The other woman in the upper echelons is Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace Fu. The second new full minister is Mr Desmond Lee, who at 41 is the youngest minister in the Cabinet. He took over as Minister for Social and Family Development (MSF) after Mr Tan Chuan-Jin's nomination as Speaker of Parliament. Mr Lee is also Second Minister for National Development. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said of the changes in Cabinet that saw the promotions: "This one is not a full set of changes. I expect to do a much bigger change next year. There will be more ministers, more changes by that time and then more new ministers will be helping their own ministries."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Mrs Teo said on Facebook in May after her appointment ceremony: "I enter a new phase with a sense of gratefulness and humility. The weight of public office is never far from my mind."

Mr Lee said in September: "My first priority at MSF is to listen and learn. I hope to meet front-line social workers and community partners."



14 Yistana residents: The Prez is my neighbour

For a short-lived month, they were the neighbours of Singapore's first heartland President. Residents of the Yishun Avenue 4 block Madam Halimah Yacob had lived in for more than 30 years were in the limelight after she declared her hope to continue living there during her term as president. Reporters came knocking for quotes and anecdotes as netizens speculated whether the President living in a Housing Board flat would be a hassle for her neighbours and security team. While some residents worried that the stepped-up security might be an inconvenience, others joked that Yishun had become Singapore's safest neighbourhood. But their moment in the sun ended in October when the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said it had "strongly advised" the President to consider moving, as security agencies would face challenges if she continued to live in her Yishun flat. Madam Halimah, acknowledging the security challenges, said: "As much as I would like to continue living in Yishun, I have accepted MHA's recommendation and will make arrangements to move."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"I feel this is the safest block in the whole of Singapore," quipped sailor Muhammad Danial Abdul Hamid in Berita Harian report.

Retiree Irene Song told The Straits Times in Mandarin: "It is hard to let go of such a good neighbour, everyone likes her. But as long as it is what she wants and she is happy, that is all that matters."

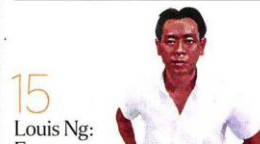


7 Low Thia Khiang, Sylvia Lim, Pritam Singh

Town council woes continued for the Workers' Party, with two lawsuits against its leaders this year. Party chief Low Thia Khiang, chairman Sylvia Lim and assistant secretary-general Pritam Singh are being sued by the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC), as well as the Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council (PRPTC) which manages the affairs of Punggol East. Punggol East was managed from 2013 to 2015 by the WP's Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council, but came under PRPTC when the WP lost it in the 2015 election. Both lawsuits are linked to \$33 million spent between July 2011 and July 2015. AHTC wants the MPs to account for the sum and to repay any money wrongfully paid to AHTC's former managing agent FM Solutions and Service. Then came another bombshell: Mr Low, 61, who has helmed the WP for 16 years, announced last month he would not contest the post of secretary-general next year, to make way for new blood. Analysts and party insiders tip Mr Singh, 41, one of the party's more visible members, as the new chief.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The AHTC lawsuit trio filed their defence in August, saying they are not personally liable for the payments by the town council to its former managing agent and service provider, and do not owe special duty of care to the town council beyond what is stated in laws governing town councils. "We acted in good faith and in accordance with our duties as town councilors," they said.



15 Louis Ng: From animals to humans

He was best known for his work on animal rights, but since entering politics in 2015, Nee Soon GRC MP Louis Ng has proven he is not a one-trick pony. The most vocal backbencher in Parliament, Mr Ng, 39, has spoken up on a swathe of issues – from gender equality to support for parents of premature and multiple babies – and for needy groups that have fallen through the aid cracks. In September, he submitted a parliamentary petition calling for a reform of the public housing policy for single parents. Mr Ng, who presented the petition on behalf of seven single parents, wants the authorities to recognise unmarried parents and their children as a family nucleus, so that they can be eligible for public housing schemes. But this was rejected by the Ministry of National Development. This year, Mr Ng did not miss a single Parliament sitting, and has, among other things, spoken on 47 Bills and filed 50 parliamentary questions. Often, he has met up with interest groups, and reached out online and to constituents for feedback and concerns to give voice to in Parliament.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

He told Insight: "I'm privileged to be in a position where I can speak up for others. I want to ensure that their voices are heard, their concerns are raised and that everyone can help shape our policies and legislation positively."



8 Leo Yip & Peter Ong: Civil Service's new era

Civil Service head Peter Ong retired in September after 31 years in public service. The Civil Service will, for the first time, be helmed by a man who began his career as a policeman. Mr Leo Yip, 53, started off as a police officer walking the ground, and rose to become the police force's director of operations. He also headed several ministries as permanent secretary, and served as Mr Lee Kuan Yew's principal private secretary. Mr Ong, 56, in his seven years as head of the Civil Service, guided its move towards digital government, and used technology and data to craft better policies and serve Singaporeans, said Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who looked forward to seeing him "continuing to contribute in different capacities".

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Mr Yip, at an annual dinner for public servants last month, urged agencies to collaborate instead of guarding their own turf. This teamwork was vital to the "whole of government" effort in building a better Singapore, he said, adding: "We must see ourselves as part of that collective, in giving directions, in taking responsibility and in being accountable." Mr Ong said of his three decades: "It has been my privilege and honour to work alongside the great men and women of the public service. They are people who serve the public with the utmost dedication, professionalism and integrity."



16 Nicole Seah: From orange to blue

She caught the public eye in the 2011 General Election, when she made her political debut as the youngest candidate on the National Solidarity Party (NSP) team fighting for Marine Parade GRC. She left the party in 2014, and was missing from the 2015 polls. But it emerged this year that Ms Seah has swapped NSP orange for Workers' Party blue, fuelling expectations that she is poised for a comeback at the next GE. She has been seen walking the ground with the WP in East Coast GRC. This GRC was hotly contested last time around. Earlier this month, the WP confirmed that Ms Seah is a volunteer. She is understood to have started volunteering with the party's media team after the 2015 election, and had written parts of the party's 60th anniversary book launched in November.

IN HER OWN WORDS

While Ms Seah herself has declined to comment, she has as far back as 2015 spurred speculation about her political allegiance when she posted a link on Facebook to an article on WP candidate He Ting Ru. A netizen told her that "Who knows, you may join the WP one day too" and this received a cheeky wink emoticon from Ms Seah, who said: "Who knows?"



9 Amos Yee: Finding asylum with Uncle Sam

Teenage blogger Amos Yee – whose claim to fame was being convicted in Singapore for derogatory remarks about Christians in a YouTube video, and publishing an obscene image of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew – was this year granted asylum in the United States. The 18-year-old fled to Chicago last December, a day before he was to report for a medical examination ahead of enlistment into national service, seeking political asylum. He was routinely detained. In March, an immigration judge decided Mr Yee had been persecuted for his political opinions in Singapore and qualified as a political refugee. This, despite opposition from the US Department of Homeland Security, which said the Singapore Government had legitimately prosecuted Mr Yee. It launched an appeal but this was dismissed by the US immigration appeals board in September, which said Mr Yee's fear of persecution was "well-founded". Since then, he has taken to social media with appeals for donations and accommodation. He will, he said, continue covering a range of topics on his YouTube channel, among them "how horrible Singapore is".

IN HIS OWN WORDS

When asked in September about his plans in the US, Mr Yee said: "To make more and more videos. I came here to escape the horrible anti-free speech laws in Singapore. Now, I can get back to work, to my life."



17 Parliamentary quotes that caused a stir

Two words – twice uttered – caused a stir. During a debate on changes to the elected presidency, Minister for the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing mistakenly addressed Madam Halimah Yacob – who was then the Speaker – as "Madam President". And not once, but twice, he called her that instead of "Madam Speaker", prompting laughter from the House. Madam Halimah said in an interview: "I thought I heard it wrong the first time, so I didn't say anything. Then it was mentioned the second time. I almost fell off the chair." "He told me it was unintended, it was a slip. I accepted his explanation." A parliamentary debate arising from the Lee family dispute, too, gave rise to some memorable quotes – primarily from WP chief Low Thia Khiang. Mr Low, questioning Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on his reluctance to sue his siblings, pointed out that when Mr Goh Chok Tong was prime minister, he had sued WP candidate Tang Liang Hong for making a defamatory police report in 1997. "Does not this also show that blood is thicker than water? Own sibling cannot sue, but political opponents and critics, sue until your pants drop." It drew a swift rejoinder from Mr Goh who said: "This is what is called political sophistry. And as for Tang Liang Hong, he's not my brother."

asyl@qims@sph.com.sg