

6 issues on watch list



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1 The silver lobby

The Government pledged last year to increase help for the pioneer generation of Singaporeans to bridge a gap in skills and income between many of the old and young.

As Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said, not only has globalisation played a factor in widening inequality, but also Singapore's rapid improvement in education in less than 50 years has exacerbated that effect.

Hence, he said, there is a disproportionate number of middle- and high-paying jobs taken up by younger Singaporeans. Singaporeans who are 55 and older, on the other hand, make up half of those in the bottom 10 per cent of the working population.

The pioneer generation consists of Singaporeans in their late 60s, some of whom may have little savings and income and find it difficult to cope with the higher cost of living and health care.

Says Singapore Management University law academic and Nominated MP Eugene Tan: "This is the generation that has provided the foundation for Singapore's success through their hard work, sacrifices and forbearance, but for some, the success of Singapore may seem to have passed them by."

This widening gap has a political impact. Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Gillian Koh says: "The seniors of Singapore are a key political constituency - we are after all an ageing society."

The number of residents aged 65 years or older is increasing rapidly. It will multiply three times from the current 300,000 to 900,000 in 2030, when one in every five residents will be a senior.

An IPS survey done after the 2011 GE found that a larger share of those in the 65 and above age category are swing voters, compared with 2006, increasing from 35.2 per cent to 45.4 per cent.

This year, the Government is set to announce its Pioneer Generation Package during the Budget.

It has also launched a major review of the national health insurance scheme Medishield to extend coverage for life to all. A review committee headed by Mr Bobby Chin, a former managing partner at accounting firm KPMG Singapore, will submit its proposal to the Government in May.

But this will not be without its challenges.

Already, with the impending changes, Singaporeans are worried about rising insurance premiums, especially as they age.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) will also increase support and advocacy for the elderly through its new seniors group, PAP.SG, set up at its last party conference last month.

Mr Inderjit Singh, an MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC, says: "With the continuously rising cost of living in Singapore, the most vulnerable group of Singaporeans are the elderly who are either retired or earn very low incomes and this group will continue to grow.

"While the younger low-income earners can go through training to improve themselves to get better-paying jobs, the elderly have less of a chance of doing such upgrading.

"So it is to be expected that the Government has to continue to focus on the elderly low-income or zero-income earners."

2 The 'shift' in action

The Prime Minister has mapped out a big shift and a new way forward that will see State and community giving more support to individuals, especially those who are older and more vulnerable.

This year will see changes to put that shift into action.

One change that will benefit children, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, is the setting up of five government-run kindergartens - the first time in decades that the State is providing pre-school education. A third of the places in these kindergartens are reserved for children from low-income homes. They are at Dazhong Primary, Punggol View Primary, Blangah Rise Primary, Farrer Park Primary, and a void deck in Tampines Street 45. They start with an intake of about 250 children.

The performance of these kindergartens will be keenly watched as the Ministry of Education aims to start 10 more such kindergartens by 2016.

With many policy changes announced last year, Mr Lim Biow Chuan, chair of the government parliamentary committee for education, says it is important to get the implementation right.

This starts with adjusting an imbalance in the amount of resources that government schools receive.

"We look at the intention to make 'every school a good school'. On paper it looks good, but in terms of implementation, my hope is for MOE to make sure that all our schools are given adequate resources," he says.

He is referring to the funds each school gets from the ministry, which are then used to invest in teachers, equipment and other teaching resources.

Last year, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat continued with a string of reforms to rebalance a tilt towards what he described as an "extreme meritocracy". He is now pushing ahead with a decision to replace the PSLE T-score with a broader grading system.

The change will take time as the transition will have a major impact on admissions to secondary schools. Already parents are concerned that the admissions process will become less transparent, and harder to predict.

Mr Lim, also an MP for Mountbatten SMC, says: "PSLE elicits a huge amount of emotion. So we need to make sure that the changes are really properly executed.

"Any adjustment may unfairly penalise the students who are doing well under the current system. So I hope MOE will devote enough time to study this."

The Government will also be considering steps to improve the mix of students from different backgrounds at top secondary schools, to guard against a concentration of students from wealthy families in top schools.

To that end, among primary schools, Mr Lim says more adjustments could also be made to the primary school admissions criteria, to give a heavier weightage to how far a student lives from the school.

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam recently reinforced the importance of intervening early in a child's education to improve social mobility.

He said studies have shown that upward mobility is higher for the poor in areas with better schools and pre-schools.

3 Standards for cyberspace

More tightening is in the works, with a review of the Broadcasting Act expected to take place this year.

The Media Development Authority (MDA) has stated its intent to prevent foreign influence over local politics through Singapore's media whether in print, broadcast or online, and it will look into incorporating more comprehensive safeguards this year.

Last June, the MDA required online news sites that report regularly on issues relating to Singapore and have significant reach among readers here to register for an individual licence.

The regulator explained that this move is to place the sites within a regulatory framework that is consistent with that for traditional news platforms, which already have to obtain such a licence.

Such sites come under the licensing law umbrella if they attract at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore in a month.

They are required to take down content that breaches certain standards, such as those on racial or religious harmony, within 24 hours of being notified, and put up a performance bond of \$50,000.

The 10 sites comprise seven Singapore Press Holdings sites such as straitstimes.com; two at MediaCorp, and Yahoo Singapore.

In explaining the change, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim added that the plan is to bring foreign websites offering media services to the Singapore market under the regime too with this year's review of the Broadcasting Act.

At the moment, the Act does not empower the Government to take action against any entity based overseas.

New laws against harassment, whether online or in everyday life, are also expected to be tabled early this year.

Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam cited a 2012 Microsoft survey that showed Singapore had the second-highest rate of online bullying among children aged eight to 17.

Mr Zaqy Mohamad, chairman of the communications and information government parliamentary committee, and an MP in Chua Chu Kang GRC, says the new laws will be to align real world norms with those in cyberspace, where the laws today are quite "weak and onerous".

SMU law academic and Nominated MP Eugene Tan says 2014 might be the last window for the Government to refine the regulatory framework as it will not do the Government any good to impose new measures too close to the next GE, which is slated for 2016.

But even with more rules and new laws, Mr Zaqy hopes regulators will "continue keeping a light touch" while aligning the rules for mainstream and new media.

"(For the Broadcasting Act review), we will see some adjustments to new media going forward. Most of the changes so far have been the alignment and updating of old policies.

That may continue, if we look at where the regulators are at. It is an evolving situation, and we have to adapt as the space evolves," he says.

4 Managing foreign workers

The riot in Little India on Dec 8 put the focus back on the Government's population policy.

A Committee of Inquiry into the incident will give its report on what it believes to be the causes, with recommendations on actions to take to prevent recurrences.

But former Nominated MP and socio-political commentator Calvin Cheng believes that concerns over the number of foreign workers in Singapore will linger.

In the aftermath of the riot, he wrote: "The Committee of Inquiry will not be as important as the Government presenting to the population how it intends to manage the growing foreign migrant worker numbers needed to build the infrastructure for a larger population."

The issue of how many foreigners there should be in Singapore is longstanding. But a reliance on them for easy economic growth, coupled with an infrastructure crunch, raised concern over their numbers, and has led to a tightening of the numbers allowed in.

There were three protests in Hong Lim Park last year against the Government's controversial White Paper on Population, which projected that there might be up to 6.9 million people here by 2030.

While the Government is unlikely to revisit the population paper this year, foreign workers and their impact on Singapore's economy and society will continue to be a key discussion point, say observers.

The focus will turn from low- wage workers to the foreign professionals on Employment Passes (EP) as the Fair Consideration Framework kicks off in August.

All eyes will be on how companies adapt to this practice, and what impact it will have on the economy.

Firms making new EP applications must advertise the job vacancy on a new jobs bank for Singaporeans for at least 14 days.

The process of implementation will start this quarter, with firms that will be subject to additional scrutiny being notified. By the middle of the year, the new jobs bank will be launched.

At the lower-wage end of the foreign worker spectrum, companies that have been heavily reliant on such labour, such as those in the retail, construction and marine industries, will have to continue adapting to a tighter labour market after successive rounds of tightening.

In July this year, the levies for foreign workers on S Passes and work permits will be increased further, rising to as much as \$950 for a foreign worker in the construction industry.

But beyond that, Barclays economist Leong Wai Ho says foreign worker tightening may take a breather this year as companies adjust to the tightening that has taken place.

He says: "We must be careful not to impose too much burden on businesses, and not to ignore global factors."

Global economic growth is expected to re-accelerate in the first half of the year, he says, and it will drive up demand for manpower in Singapore.

Officially, Singapore is expected to grow by between 2 per cent and 4 per cent this year, after growing 3.7 per cent last year.

This growth will lead to a tightening of the labour market and wages being pushed up, says Mr Leong. So firms will find it harder and costlier to hire foreign workers, even if the existing controls are not changed.

"We have done enough and now need to strike a careful balance. There is a strong case for the foreign worker tightening on the supply side to pause in 2014, allowing businesses breathing room (and government assistance) to consolidate and plan for their future."

The Government's long-term plan to restructure the economy and raise productivity will also come under scrutiny. Its target is to raise productivity by between 2 per cent and 3 per cent each year but progress so far has been disappointing, with productivity averaging -0.6 per cent in the first three quarters of last year.

5 Jostling for the next GE

With the next general election another year closer, 2014 is likely to see the sparring between the PAP and the opposition Workers' Party (WP) heat up.

But how will the WP calibrate its responses to increased attacks from the ruling party? Will the WP keep quiet, engage or go on the offensive?

Since the PAP lost Aljunied GRC in the 2011 General Election, it has been fighting to regain the momentum and votes won by the Workers' Party.

PAP MP Zaqy Mohamad says there is likely to be more "friction" between the ruling party and the opposition as the battle lines are drawn: "In the first half of the term, we were in recovery mode. There was some angst in the GE and the Government has responded with various measures to assure that the voices have been heard.

"In the second half, when it comes to politics, we will see the reheating of some still not resolved issues, and friction as all parties ramp up for the next GE."

Already, the party has been raising more questions about the WP. It has criticised the WP for the lack of a clear stand on national issues, such as an alternative population plan, and whether nurses and other public officers should be allowed to wear the hijab at work.

The WP is also being watched on how it copes with town council management on a much larger scale, following the additions of Aljunied GRC and Punggol East SMC to Hougang SMC.

Last year, the PAP took another step in its transformation. It adopted a new resolution, setting broad directions for itself, after engaging its activists over three months.

The resolution updates the party's democratic socialist ideals, and spells these out in new language: to build a Singaporean Singapore; an open and compassionate meritocracy; a fair and just society; and a democracy of deeds.

The new resolution may well inform its 2016 election manifesto, say political observers.

The PAP will also celebrate a key milestone in its history - its 60th year of existence since its founding in a Singapore still under colonial rule.

It is expected to introduce more new faces on the ground as it starts to build up its slate of candidates for the next election.

Observers will be watching to see the type and mix of potential candidates, as the PAP looks to show that it is not a party that has lost touch with the ground.

Says IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh: "Apart from getting the policies right, there is the bigger task of getting the people right." What Singapore becomes will have an impact on what the PAP will have to be as a political movement, she adds.

"Can it be that broad of a broad church? Or will it have to cede ground to other political movements and groups if the Singapore that results from its policies is one with such diverse interests?"

6 Singapore@50

Looking ahead to 2015, when Singapore marks its 50th year of independence, the SG50 Committee plans to launch this month a call for celebration ideas, says Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong.

Mr Wong sits on the 29-member committee, which is chaired by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat. It wants to let ordinary Singaporeans have a role in planning and organising the celebrations.

Mr Wong's ministry will also be busy with the opening of the Sports Hub, which will be phased in from April. The Hub will play host to sporting events and concerts it hopes will attract many Singaporeans. He says: "On the sports front, we already have a good line-up of events in 2014, including the Asian Netball Championships in September, the WTA Championships in October and the Suzuki Cup in December. We also have many event promoters expressing interest in concerts and entertainment shows.

"Many of us still remember the Kallang Roar in the days of the Malaysia Cup, or the mega-events at the stadium, like the concert by Michael Jackson in the early '90s.



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"So with our new stadium, I look forward to an even more exciting calendar of concerts and events that will bring Singaporeans together, and create special experiences and shared memories for all of us to enjoy."

Of the 50th anniversary celebrations, Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad says it is a good opportunity to "re-energise Singaporeans and the Singapore spirit".

"This is the time to do it, as many Singaporeans are asking: 'Are we a nation that has built a lot, achieved wonders, but has no soul?'"

Whether a good feeling prevails this year will also depend on how effectively the Government communicates its plans and policies, say MPs and observers.

The Our Singapore Conversation was largely seen as a successful exercise that fed into the policy-planning process, and the Government has pledged to continue engagement in that manner.

Marine Parade GRC MP Tin Pei Ling says: "I hope that all levels of government will do more to engage Singaporeans. Government must work harder at explaining key policy decisions in a manner that all Singaporeans can understand and connect with.

"This is the only way we can garner support for important policies or difficult decisions and keep our society cohesive and strong."

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