



CALL TO ARMS: At the People's Action Party convention at Kallang Theatre yesterday, Prime Minister Lee said that in a more contested political environment, the PAP cannot just serve the people, but must also fight for what it believes in. PHOTO: THE STRAITS TIMES

# Fighting talk from PAP, with eye on GE

BY ADRIAN LIM

**A**FTER a historic loss in the last general election, a controversial Population White Paper, bruising defeats in two by-elections and countless criticisms online, the People's Action Party (PAP) is ready to fight back.

With the next general election firmly in his sights, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong outlined the party's political recalibration and issued his call to arms to some 1,400 party activists yesterday at the party's convention.

In a more contested political environment, the PAP cannot just serve the people, but "we must also fight for what we believe in", said PM Lee, the party's secretary-general.

This would include convincing Singaporeans that the PAP cause is right; rebutting and correcting untruths and half-truths, "especially online"; building a broad coalition of supporters among other groups in society and countering opposition moves.

"Stand firm whatever the difficulties, never give up... Ultimately, that is what the future of Singapore depends on," said PM Lee firmly, in one of several instances in his half-hour speech that sought to emphasise the importance of the PAP to the country.

Yesterday was only the second

time in its 59-year history that the PAP adopted a resolution to chart the party's direction forward. It comprises six ideals, including building a fair and just society, and upholding an open and compassionate meritocracy.

At the convention at Kallang Theatre, PM Lee noted that the party is at an "inflection point". Singapore now has a more diverse society, a more mature economy, and has seen more political contests.

The PAP has taken Singapore thus far in its journey from Third World to First, he said and, going forward, "only the PAP can provide this leadership".

Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing, the party's organising secretary, said the Government has adjusted policies to address "pain points" faced by Singaporeans, such as housing, transport and the inflow of foreigners.

It has also evolved its approach to governance and communications, where now "instead of announcing policy after it is cooked", it shares its broad intent early, he said.

But that is not enough, and activists have to take after the 1960s generation of PAP pioneers, "to fight to get our message across at every corner - street corner, cyberspace corner, mass media and social media".

Associate Professor Reuben Wong from the National University of Singapore said that from

2011, the PAP has been on "high defensive posture" and reacting to the electoral setbacks. But, since then, it has been gradually "stepping up on the offensive", with moves like introducing Singaporeans First policies.

Dr Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University said that, now, "the PAP realises that it has to campaign as a political party and not as the ruling party or the government".

"For too long, PAP as the political party and PAP as the government were conflated. One consequence is that the Government's shortcomings become imputed to the PAP. In essence, it seeks to refresh itself and the resolution can be likened to the party's mid-term manifesto: A road map for the rest of the current Parliament's term."

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## Resolution reflects current complexities

THE new resolution adopted by the People's Action Party (PAP) appears to acknowledge the complexities of a mature and developed Singapore in 2013.

First on its six-point list: Strengthening the Singaporean identity, followed by creating opportunities for all to build a better life.

The PAP also wants to develop a sense of collective responsibility, and resolves to be a responsive and responsible government.

This stands in contrast to the party's Agenda for Action adopted in 1988, which addressed the needs of a then still-developing Singapore in four areas: Na-

tion-building, economic growth and progress, human resources and education, and social and cultural development.

In nation-building, the party pledged to strengthen racial and religious harmony, build consensus, strengthen community ties and welfare, upgrade homes and maintain vigilance against external threats.

The other areas focused on developing the economy and upgrading workers' skills; excellence in education, including learning "Asian values" and the study of Mother Tongue languages; and making Singapore a more cultured society.

But one striking difference is

perhaps the shift in emphasis when it comes to state welfare.

"Self-reliance and concern for others are two sides of the same coin," declared the 1988 Agenda for Action, which went on to say exactly which side of that coin should come first: "The best form of welfare is to enable people to earn their own living. The PAP wants all Singaporeans to be able to look after ourselves.

"But, in every society, some will lag behind, and be poorer than the others. Let us be a compassionate society... Let us help them to help themselves."

Fast forward to 2013, and the coin has flipped somewhat.

The party now stresses an

"open and compassionate" meritocracy and a "fair and just society that shares the benefits of progress with all Singaporeans", with a progressive tax and benefits system.

In its resolution addendum, the party speaks of the need for a social-welfare system that addresses immediate concerns, given the ageing population, but one that is also sustainable and avoids the "mistakes and problems" of other systems.

"(A fair and just society) was the founding mission of the party in 1954, and it is even more relevant today, as we confront the forces of globalisation and rapid technological change," it says.