

COMMENTARY: OUTLOOK 2022

Priorities for Singapore in 2022: pandemic, politics, presidency, patriarchy, and planet

By Eugene K B Tan

BY ALL accounts, 2021 was a challenging year. It was the second year of the raging pandemic. Its dominance and unpredictable arc means that governments and people around the world have had to constantly adapt to the ever-changing normality.

Although vaccinations have provided some measure of confidence to individual and collective well-being, new variants of the coronavirus – such as the Delta and Omicron – prevent humankind from claiming victory.

We should be prepared for the third year to be as challenging as the first two. We have been here before.

In Singapore, pandemic-weary as we are, we will have to live even more confidently with Covid-19 in 2022. There is no alternative to that. There is no linear path to living with Covid-19 – restrictions will have to be calibrated to the ever-evolving pandemic situation.

Relaxation and tightening of measures – whether they relate to safe management measures, vaccinated travel lanes, work, play, and education – will be the norm.

When the pandemic first reared its ugly head in 2020, fear of the virus had spread faster than the virus itself. Fast forward to 2022. We now have to manage the fear of living with the virus.

"Keep calm and safe, and carry on" is a reminder useful in these challenging times. Life must go on. Self-indulgent wallowing in fear will not make the virus go away.

For Singapore, even more critical challenges lie ahead as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong outlined in his New Year's Day Message last

Friday (Dec 31).

The imperative to rebuild the economy and generate, in his words, "new growth, new jobs, and prosperity in a post-pandemic economy".

Reconnecting with the world is necessary for a trade- and investment-dependent economy.

Keeping the pandemic at bay and having an open economy is not a zero-sum game. We will need to get the balance right. Fortitude is needed as we are in this for the long haul.

Politics and presidency

The new year also promises a weighty political agenda. Parliament's Committee of Privileges (COP) is investigating the complaint of breach of parliamentary privilege by then-Sengkang GRC member of Parliament Raeesah Khan. She had admitted to lying to Parliament on 3 separate occasions last year in an anecdote on police insensitivity in dealing with a sexual assault victim.

In an unexpected twist, the debacle has also ensnared the Workers Party's top leadership with Khan alleging that her former party leaders were complicit in her not coming clean about her lies.

In examining the circumstances into and surrounding Khan's lies, the COP has to determine, without fear or favour, if other individuals were involved in or had contributed to her misconduct.

The COP's report and recommendations will be much anticipated. Parliament will have to debate them and mete out the appropriate sanctions on those culpable.

Besides Parliament, the COP has to persuade the public that its find-

ings are fair and evidence-based.

The report and its recommendations would have no credibility if the COP is seen to be doing a hatchet job. Ultimately, the COP and Parliament have to prevail in the court of public opinion.

In 2022, will Singaporeans come to know which fourth-generation leader will be the successor to PM Lee as leader of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP)?

Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's bombshell announcement in April last year that he will step aside as the 4G leader to succeed Lee is another sobering reminder of the uncertainty even in a meticulously-planned leadership renewal.

The PAP will have its elections for its central executive committee at the end of 2022.

Might the PAP use the occasion to endorse Lee's successor? Will the 4G leaders reveal who among them is "first among equals" before the party's internal elections?

Although the next general election need only be held latest in November 2025, time is of the essence. Lee's successor and his team will have to hit the ground running in demonstrating that they are deserving of Singaporeans' trust and confidence. Singaporeans will need to have adequate time to get to know the putative premier, his plans, and to warm up to him.

Unlike the previous two leadership renewals, the focus this time is very much on the team, rather than a standout individual.

Consensus will also have to coalesce on the pair that is best suited to lead Singapore. As they have been working together for up to a decade now, I believe most, if not



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all, of the 4G leaders know by now who is best placed to lead them.

The pandemic is a continuing real-life test of each leader's calibre, teamwork, authority and leadership. Might determining the best possible pairing be complicating things somewhat?

The PAP must get it right this time. The ruling party will have to keep to its choice regardless of how they fare in the next election.

The next presidential election, open to candidates from all races, will take place in 2023.

It is hoped that presidential hopefuls will in the course of 2022 declare their interest in contesting. Singaporeans ought to have as much notice of the hopefuls seeking to be head of state.

It is also hoped that there will be a contest then. The first reserved presidential election in 2017 ended anti-climatically with Halimah Yacob being the only eligible Malay candidate.

Of the 5 presidential elections since 1993, only 2 were contested (in 1993 and 2011). A contest can enable more Singaporeans to have a better understanding of the powers and limits of the presidency in our system of constitutional government.

Doing away with 'patriarchy'

In conjunction with the Year of Cel-

ebrating SG Women in 2021, a review and series of conversations were conducted on women's development in Singapore, in particular to better understand the aspirations and needs of Singaporean women, and to ensure our laws and policies evolve in tandem.

From the public consultations and dialogues, a White Paper will be tabled in Parliament this year. This document will likely set out a broad suite of policy recommendations with a roadmap for implementation.

Will there be innovative policies and laws in the same way that the Women's Charter was a game-changer legislation when it was enacted in 1961? More importantly, will society usher in gender norms relevant to the times?

The Women's Charter mandated the equality of the wife and husband in a marriage, and provided for married women to have a separate identity from their husbands.

It was also the death-knell for polygamous marriages by providing only for monogamous marriages for non-Muslim Singaporeans. (Marriages between Muslims are generally governed by Shariah law.)

Planetary priorities

On the back of last year's United Nations Climate Change Conference,

Singapore must renew and redouble its efforts and play an outsized role in combating and mitigating climate change.

We have not and will not be spared the impacts of climate change – whether it is manifested in higher sea levels, erratic and intense rainfalls, food security and water availability.

It is high time to have Singaporeans engage in collective action with urgency, including fulfilling our state obligations in the climate deal, dubbed the Glasgow Climate Pact. Singapore will have to review its national climate pledges as part of the climate pact, which seeks to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

Dealing with climate change is not only an existential challenge but can offer innovation and economic opportunities. However, a fundamental shift in attitudes and lifestyles is necessary if Singapore's national response is to cut it.

As a sign of the times, extraordinary shifts are already occurring across the planet that will shape markets, politics and societies well beyond 2022. It may be no different in Singapore.

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