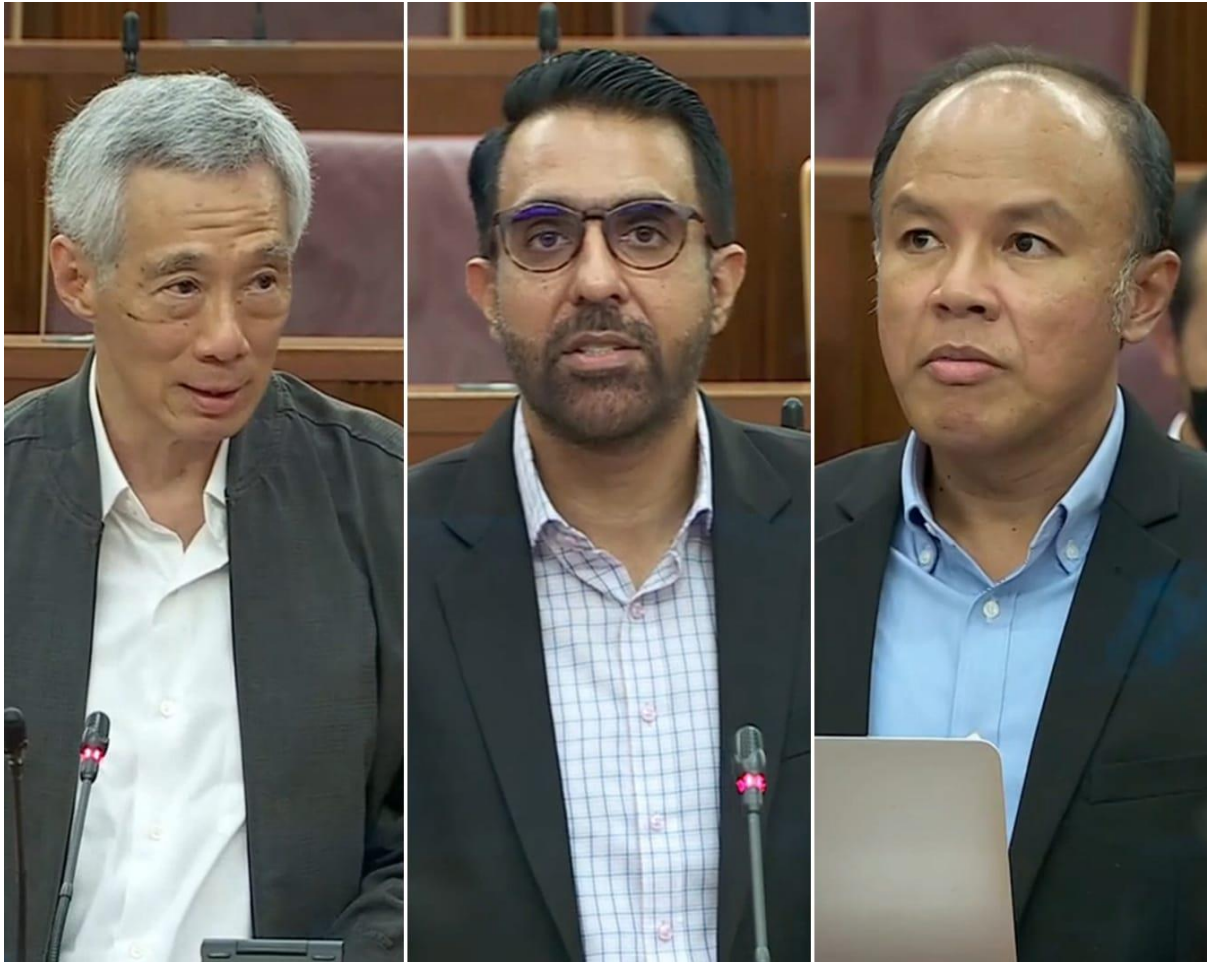


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What transpired in Parliament on Tuesday (Feb 15) during the four-hour debate on the Committee of Privileges (COP) report on the lies told by former Workers' Party (WP) Member of Parliament (MP) Raeesah Khan was a defining moment — not just for the WP but for Singapore as well.

It raises questions whether Singapore is ready to transition to a two- or multi-party democracy. More importantly, it invites Singaporeans to consider and demand what standards of conduct and probity are expected of our parliamentary democracy and of our parliamentarians.

To be clear, one-party dominance will weaken in Singapore in the longer term, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged when he joined the debate on Tuesday.

Singaporeans desire more political diversity and contestation and it is vital that there is a political party ready to form the government should the ruling People's Action Party be voted out of office.

Thus, the competence and honesty of our leaders are critical to our governance.

The WP's response in Parliament on Tuesday was an unequivocal demonstration that it has chosen to bury its head in the sand.

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It regards the COP inquiry as a politicised witch hunt and that its Members of Parliament (MPs) were being dealt with for their “political work”.

Such a disconnect from reality was baffling as much as a wasted opportunity for the WP.

Tuesday’s debate could have been a chance for the leading opposition party to rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes of the sad saga, staunching the inevitable bleeding of public trust and confidence.

Instead the WP MPs demonstrated that under the current leadership, building a First World Parliament is low on their priorities and that it was more a slogan for electioneering. They are also relying on having a perceived free pass by virtue of being the leading opposition party for the last two decades.

WP secretary-general and Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh, while defiant, offered a tame and half-hearted defence.

He began by repeating the specific sexual assault on former Sengkang Group Representation Constituency MP, Ms Raeesah, which she had shared in confidence with her party leaders.

Mr Singh did not make any serious effort at discrediting the COP findings and recommendations. Instead, he opted to limit his remarks on the COP report on the basis that his actions before the COP would be examined by the Public Prosecutor when Parliament refers his conduct to the Public Prosecutor.

However, the Parliament (Privileges, Immunities and Powers) Act 1962 provides that there shall be freedom of speech and debate and proceedings in Parliament and such freedom “shall not be liable to be impeached or questioned in any court ...”. There should be no concerns about self-incrimination.

Mr Singh’s speech set the tone for the other WP MPs, including party chairperson Sylvia Lim, and party vice-chair, Mr Faisal Manap, who the COP had found stating untruths to the COP while on oath or affirmation.

In other words, had the WP leaders been so minded to persuade the non-government MPs to vote against or abstain on the second motion that was about their conduct in the saga, they did not make much headway.

Their silence on the material parts of the charges was telling. That they have so far opted not to address the essence of the very serious charges is perplexing.

Worse, the WP has opted to play victim, hinting that the COP process is political persecution. Mr Singh alluded to this when he questioned how the COP process which was originally about Ms Raeesah’s misconduct had instead become centred on him and his party leaders.

The remaining six WP MPs did not participate in the debate on Tuesday. Going by the WP MPs’ collective response in Parliament, it is clear that they have closed ranks, digging in their heels further for now.

In the months ahead, possible law enforcement investigation and further action by Parliament will legitimately raise credibility issues for the party leaders and cast a dark cloud not just over them but the party as a whole.

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WP cadres, members and volunteers are likely to re-examine, in their own way, their association with the party and their views on the party leaders.

The party has other legal woes. There is the Aljunied Hougang Town Council lawsuit where the WP leaders and town councillors are appealing against the High Court decision which had found them liable for breaching their fiduciary duties in town council matters.

With lots on their plate, the reality is that their resources, time and energy will be spent dealing with these issues which could otherwise be deployed to walking and working the ground.

The COP report raises the legitimate question of whether Mr Singh should step aside as Leader of the Opposition in the meantime. The COP's finding that Mr Singh had been instrumental in the plot to mislead Parliament is a grave charge and a stain on the office.

To recap, in the 2020 general election where the WP won an unprecedented 10 seats, Prime Minister Lee announced that formal recognition would be accorded to Mr Singh as Leader of the Opposition.

To this end, the Leader of the Opposition office seeks to institutionalise the Opposition's role in Singapore's system of constitutional checks and balances.

It also recognises the imperative of socialising the Opposition and Singaporeans to the importance of clean politics and good governance in Singapore.

Parliament did right on Tuesday in voting to refer the conduct of Mr Singh and Mr Faisal to the Public Prosecutor. It is a wise and prudent move.

It is noteworthy that a fresh investigation will be conducted for the Public Prosecutor to decide if a criminal case is made out. Both WP MPs will have their day in court, if they are charged, and they can clear their names.

They will be entitled to legal counsel and examination of prosecution's witnesses. The standard of proof required for conviction is beyond a reasonable doubt for criminal cases.

The WP's star had been rising significantly since the 2011 general election. Another breakthrough was made in the 2020 general election.

Now it has been rudely brought down to earth through the conduct of the party leaders, which had not only severely aggravated the breach of parliamentary privilege by Ms Raeesah but is also conduct unbecoming.

Mr Singh's response and those of his fellow WP MPs in Parliament on Tuesday is defining for him and his party.

On Tuesday, Singapore also marked the 80th anniversary of the fall of Singapore during the Second World War.

It was a sombre reminder that not only must we not take our defence and sovereignty for granted but also that Singaporeans must fervently want to uphold and defend the type of parliamentary democracy in Singapore.

It must be one characterised by the values and norms of integrity, trust, and moral courage to do right by Singapore and Singaporeans.

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