



How the Government translates the views of Singaporeans and co-creates policies and programmes with the people and private sectors will form a key plank of its political agenda in Parliament's second session – starting from April 10 – and its election manifesto, says the writer. Parliament's other priorities will be to improve public housing affordability and accessibility, strengthen the training and placement ecosystem for workers, and making Singapore more inclusive. ST PHOTO: RYAN CHIONG

The pressures and pivot points in Parliament's next session

Much unfinished business needs to be tackled amid looming elections and intensifying global challenges

Eugene Tan

When the 14th Parliament first sat on Aug 24, 2020, Singapore was starting down the "crisis of a generation" Covid-19 pandemic. Parliament had to hit the ground running, and did so with the largest representation of 12 opposition Members of Parliament, including for the first time a Leader of the Opposition. Parliament now takes a well-deserved break – termed a prorogue – before resuming its legislative agenda on April 10 with President Halimah Yacob delivering the final President's Address of her current tenure. The address will lay out the Government's priorities, programmes and policies for the rest of the parliamentary term which concludes on Aug 23, 2025. This second session signals the home stretch to the next general election, which must be held at the latest in November 2025. Not only that, it will be pivotal as the rapidly changing global environment becomes potentially more threatening to Singapore, while creating centrifugal forces of insecurity domestically. With pandemic concerns significantly abated and Singaporeans better adjusted to living with the virus, the stage is set to press on with the post-pandemic agenda. How Singapore navigates the uncharted waters is potentially game-changing for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). The Workers' Party (WP), meanwhile, will continue to press the PAP hard on the people's pain-points, even as it grapples with its internal issues which will divide its attention and energy.

WORK CUT OUT IN SECOND SESSION

Parliamentary business in the second session will take place under quite a different set of external pressures, dynamics and constraints that fuel the lingering pandemic-induced economic malaise and uncertainty. Economic stresses and volatility will make recovery patchy and uncertain. The war in Ukraine and geopolitical tensions in East Asia continue to spook markets. Protectionism persists in rearing its ugly head and is increasingly manifested in reshoring by global companies. All these accentuate domestic concerns of costs of living, financial security and the general sense of well-being. All eyes will be on the Forward Singapore engagement exercise as it concludes later in 2023. Revitalising Singapore's social compact for a fairer and more just society requires a concerted whole-of-society effort and a well-coordinated whole-of-government drive. Successfully remaking the social compact calls for intensified collaboration among all stakeholders in the years ahead. How the Government translates the views of Singaporeans and co-creates policies and programmes with the people and private sectors will form a key plank of its political agenda in Parliament's second session and its election manifesto. Parliament's other priorities will be to improve public housing affordability and accessibility, strengthen the training and placement ecosystem for workers, and making Singapore more inclusive. Longer-term priorities include developing public

infrastructure, and perennial population and immigration challenges, as well as protecting Singapore's sovereignty by nimbly steering the country amid intense geopolitical rivalry. The PAP Government has to be more than equal to the task of managing the economic vagaries, something which has been a pillar of its performance legitimacy so far. Voters expect the Government to not only cushion them from the onslaught of economic insecurity, but to also overcome the constraints of a city-state with no natural resources. On the legislative front, the Government will continue to update existing laws and introduce new ones, including laws to protect society from online harm and "cancel campaigns". Incremental changes to policies and laws can be expected with the growing importance of post-material concerns, such as social equity and national identity. The PAP will make haste in showing that it is fully capable of leading Singapore despite global headwinds. As it prepares for generational leadership change, the PAP will also have to demonstrate the relevance of one-party dominance amid the electorate's desire for political diversity and competition. **WP'S PROMISE AND WOES** The Workers' Party started this parliamentary term promisingly on the back of its best electoral performance so far that emerged in the July 2020 polls, resulting in its leader Pritam Singh being made Leader of the Opposition. In total, the opposition comprised 10 elected Workers' Party MPs and two Non-Constituency MPs from the Progress Singapore Party. The WP initially focused on governance and bread-and-butter issues to demonstrate that it is closer to the ground and that

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Singapore can move towards a two-party political system. It went seemingly well as the party, with its line-up of fresh faces, sought to appeal to young Singaporeans – until the Committee of Privileges inquiry into former WP MP Raeesah Khan's lying to Parliament. The committee found Ms Khan guilty of abusing parliamentary privilege, and severely sanctioned her. The committee also recommended that WP leaders Pritam Singh and Faisal Manap be referred to the Public Prosecutor for being "untruthful in their evidence under oath". How this saga will unfold will be impactful not just on the party – it will be potentially game-changing for Singapore politics. The WP has been resilient in the past two decades, overcoming setbacks and building its branding, which provides a reservoir of goodwill and trust. As the leading opposition party by a long way, it has secured a place in the evolving political landscape. It

may yet turn the "crisis" into an opportunity.

ON TO THE HUSTINGS

In a more contested political landscape, how politicians garner popularity matters as much as being popular. MPs must not lose sight that Parliament is more than a debate chamber. It is where proposed laws are passionately debated, government policies and actions closely scrutinised, and the battle to win the hearts and minds of Singaporeans ardently fought. With more than half of the parliamentary term completed, the prorogation also signals the countdown to the next general election. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is expected to make his annual Cabinet reshuffle in the next few weeks, alongside the usual promotions, blooding of new office-holders, and possibly even retirements. How extensive the changes are, will be a talking point. The last reshuffle in June 2022 was limited, mainly affecting ministers of state. In the May 2021 reshuffle, seven ministries had new ministers appointed. Four other ministers have helmed their ministries since July 2020. PM Lee may consider it timely to make extensive changes in the line-up, exposing the office-holders to new assignments, and for new perspectives to be brought in. Excluding the Prime Minister's Office, only four out of 15 ministries are helmed by third-generation leaders in their mid-60s. There is certainly scope and urgency for the fourth-generation leaders to take on heavier responsibilities, although it is also invaluable for the Cabinet to have experienced ministers. As the 4G team prepares to take over, its members will have to

continue to earn the trust and confidence of Singaporeans. During Parliament's first session, the 4G leaders settled on Finance Minister Lawrence Wong to succeed Mr Lee as party leader in April 2022 after Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's unexpected decision to step aside the previous year. Both the PAP and the WP will strive to raise their profiles in Parliament and will aim to go to voters with the best possible report card in the upcoming general election. In the 2020 General Election, despite the raging pandemic, voters opted for a flight away from the status quo rather than a flight to safety. Moreover, how the past three years of the pandemic have moulded people's outlook and perceptions towards politics and life are shaping the electoral contours. The party with the best pulse of the political zeitgeist will stand to reap significant political dividends. The upcoming presidential election in September may provide further insights into the political mood. In what remains of this parliamentary term, we can expect an equally active and packed legislative agenda, more robust debates, and perhaps confrontation and drama as well. The greater interest in parliamentary proceedings has been helped by the live streaming on YouTube of parliamentary sittings, which was initiated in the first session. But even as we watch in real-time the cut and thrust of debates and become absorbed by the occasional histrionics, it bears remembering founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's exhortation in 1999 that, "In this chamber, we are playing for keeps. The future of Singapore... is not a question for light-hearted banter... Parliament (is) an arena for the contest of wits and wills over matters of policies". MPs must get it right in the second session if Singapore is to continue to be exceptional and thriving. Building a better Singapore post-crisis in a challenging and uncertain environment will test the mettle of our society. Eugene K. B. Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University and a Nominated Member of Parliament in the 12th Parliament.