

Progress Singapore Party at the crossroads, in search of relevance

Leong Mun Wai's appointment as secretary-general could herald a more confrontational style of politics



The handing over of the PSP mantle from older stalwarts to Mr Leong Mun Wai and Ms Hazel Poa marks a critical juncture for the party. PHOTO: GOV.SG



Whether the Progress Singapore Party can emerge from the shadow of its founder and chairman Tan Cheng Bock to build a resonant political agenda and form a strong team will determine the trajectory of the party for the rest of this decade, says the writer. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

Eugene K.B. Tan

Almost three years since the dizzying days of the 2020 General Election where the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) was an electoral sensation, it has had to deal with the growing pains of a new party. It has seen significant churn in its leadership and membership ranks amid internal differences played out in public. Many candidates from the last general election like Mr Brad Bowyer and Mr Terence Soon have left the party.

Earlier this week, the PSP settled on Mr Leong Mun Wai, a Non-Constituency Member of Parliament, as the party's third secretary-general since its founding in 2019.

The handing over of the mantle from older party stalwarts to Mr Leong and Ms Hazel Poa, the party's other NCMP and new vice-chair, marks a critical juncture for the party. Three of its 12 central executive committee members did not contest in the last general election.

Mr Leong has his work cut out for him. The PSP must carve out its own identity and branding instead of relying on the heft of its founder and chairman, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, a former veteran People's Action Party (PAP) MP, who contested unsuccessfully in the 2011 Presidential Election, to carry it forward.

Whether the PSP can emerge from Dr Tan's shadow to build a resonant political agenda and form a strong team will determine the trajectory of the party for the rest of this decade.

The key question for the PSP as it prepares for the next general election, due by November 2025, is whether it will be seen as a credible opposition party with a desired value proposition distinct from the leading Workers' Party (WP) and the ability to attract talent.

The challenge is that PSP has preferred to resort to personality politics instead of decisively tackling these tougher issues.

THE RISE AND RISE OF LEONG MUN WAI

After more than two years in Parliament, Mr Leong has gained a higher public profile than his predecessor and his fellow NCMP Hazel Poa. He is now the face of the PSP, with Dr Tan receding more into the background as a party elder.

Mr Leong's elevation could signal the PSP's endorsement of his approach to debate in Parliament. In turn, he might be encouraged to continue with his dogged but confrontational style. We might see Mr Leong, as the PSP's vanguard, upping the ante when Parliament reopens on April 10.

Mr Leong can be described as a divisive politician given his penchant for histrionics and grandstanding. But he also quite successfully portrays himself as the proverbial David against Goliath.

His doggedness and refusal to be cowed by the PAP front bench has won him admirers for being the voice of the voiceless. His brusqueness is worn like a badge of honour and his supporters cheer his defiance. Meanwhile, his

policy suggestions may sound radical but have some appeal to segments of the Singapore electorate who feel that existing policies do not work for them.

However, his antics and his playing fast and loose with Parliament's Standing Orders have also got him into regular trouble.

Mr Leong's modus operandi includes using the live streaming of Parliament's proceedings and Facebook to capture attention with his stinging assertions. On several occasions, he had to be told to sit down by Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin, after he spoke out of turn or attempted to hog question time after a reply to a Parliament question had been delivered.

He has also been held to account on several occasions in Parliament and reprimanded for his actions. In March 2022, he was made to apologise to the Speaker and the House for impugning the Speaker and the parliamentary process and alleging that he was unfairly prevented from asking more questions during the debate on the Ministry of Manpower's estimates.

Similarly, his proclivity for putting out skewed and potentially misleading information, instead of setting out relevant facts, and regularly making unsubstantiated allegations inside and outside of Parliament, may have unfortunately reinforced the impression of his being an irresponsible legislator among some quarters.

For instance, in January 2022, he alleged in Parliament that school teachers were practising

vaccination-differentiated measures in national schools.

When Education Minister Chan Chun Sing asked for details of this serious allegation so that his ministry could follow up, not only was Mr Leong unable to do so, but he also doubled down in prevaricating and evading the issue while pointing only to a Telegram chat screenshot sent to him by a Facebook friend.

Just last month before Parliament prorogued, Mr Leong entangled himself again when he alleged in a Facebook post that Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean and Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam risked turning Parliament into a platform to colour public opinion on criminal proceedings regarding a case involving Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern.

He has since edited his post but the allegations were serious. He could still be referred to Parliament's Committee of Privileges for this grave allegation, or the Public Prosecutor for possible contravention of Section 31(1)(g) of the Parliament (Privileges, Immunities and Powers) Act.

The said provision makes it an offence for any person to "publish any statement, whether in writing or otherwise, which falsely or scandalously defames, or which reflects on the character of, the Speaker or any Member touching on his conduct in Parliament or anything done or said by him in Parliament".

The trouble is that a sanctioning of Mr Leong instead might win him more plaudits for his combative, "take no prisoners" style in a

one-party-dominant Parliament. It might burnish his credentials as a fearless politician.

HIS APPEAL IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Should Mr Leong temper his rhetoric and focus on demonstrating policy nous, it may well be that the PSP might appeal to the broad middle ground of voters.

The party and Mr Leong can be critical about our foreign manpower policy and do appear to want to show that they strive to protect Singaporeans' jobs and livelihoods. However, Mr Leong's diatribe against foreigners during the September 2021 debates on two parliamentary motions on jobs, livelihoods, and immigration gives legitimate cause for concern that the party has an anti-foreigner orientation.

Mr Leong's star is rising within the PSP. Outside of the party, however, his regular and persistent breaches of parliamentary rules, norms and decorum may cast self-inflicted aspersions on his conduct and make him look out of his depth in Parliament, even as his defenders plead that he had been unfairly dealt with for speaking up.

By all means, parliamentarians should engage in robust debates but they must uphold the dignity and duty of Parliament. Moreover, they must be exemplary in demonstrating that they can disagree without being disagreeable.

Rather than focus his energies on playing hardball in Parliament, Mr Leong would do well to concentrate on the bigger challenges confronting the PSP. Its foremost priority should be to renew the promise and potential demonstrated in 2020 when the party outperformed more established opposition parties and offered the prospect of a multi-party democracy here.

PSP MUST DEFINE WHAT IT STANDS FOR

The PSP also urgently needs to distinguish itself from the WP.

The possibility of a turf war between the two parties cannot be discounted as the WP seeks to enlarge its parliamentary presence and the PSP looks to win its first elected seats. This is even as the WP has traditionally focused on the eastern and north-eastern parts of the island, and the PSP, on the central and western parts of the island.

With a general election likely in late 2024 to early 2025, after the presidential election is completed later in 2023, time is of the essence for Mr Leong and his team to raise the standing and relevance of the PSP. They will need to attract new faces and young volunteers.

How well they do so will determine whether they will be a serious player in Singapore's evolving political firmament.

The perennial question concerns what the PSP stands for. Since its founding, the PSP has advocated "Singapore for Singaporeans" as it focuses on Singaporeans' pain points regarding the cost of living, residential property prices, jobs and livelihoods, and immigration. These issues have continuing appeal to uncommitted voters prepared to cast protest votes but this will not be enough for the PSP to cross the final threshold and win seats.

More fundamentally, can the PSP win over more Singaporeans by proposing policies that work for trade- and foreign investment-dependent Singapore and internationally minded Singaporean youth in a rapidly changing global environment? Can the PSP weave together a cogent agenda that demonstrates what it stands for?

And with its political honeymoon long over, will the PSP excite voters once again on the campaign trail when the next election comes round?

Much will hinge on whether Mr Leong can inspire the electorate's trust and confidence in PSP's policies alongside his firebrand style of politics, which is a vast change from what Singaporeans are accustomed to.

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