

# *WP and PAP: Counting the costs of scandals*

The recent revelations of extramarital affairs within the parties have left the public troubled, with questions about what to expect of their leaders and members, and the standards for politics in Singapore.

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The dust has far from settled. But after leaders of the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP) recently addressed the questions hanging over the conduct of their members, we at least have more information to help make sense of these politically tumultuous times.

The WP leaders addressed the issue of the "inappropriate exchange" between its parliamentarian, Mr Leon Perera of Aljunied GRC, and its member, Ms Nicole Seah who contested in East Coast GRC in the 2020 General Election – they did indeed have an extramarital affair.

They have resigned from the party, which in effect means that Mr Perera will also no longer be a Member of Parliament.

The ruling PAP has also lost two of its MPs due to similar transgressions – Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, who resigned as Speaker of Parliament, and Ms Cheng Li Hui, who left her Tampines GRC seat.

How do we assess the parties' responses, and what will these developments mean for the political ecosystem going forward?

### LOSS OF REPRESENTATION

For the Workers' Party, it is the loss of a second of only 10 duly elected MPs after GE2020, the point being that each one of these was presumably a hard-fought victory.

If it did mean as much as we imagine then it is difficult to fathom why better judgment did not prevail over Mr Perera.

In the case of the resignation of the People's Action Party MPs, the matter of personal indiscretions and lying to party leadership were equally egregious, if not more so, given Mr Tan's position.

But the WP as an opposition party has had to struggle harder to establish credibility, build trust, and wrest seats from the PAP.

Arguably, the price paid by the WP is far costlier; the loss in representation of an alternative voice – more significant to us.

### AFFAIRS, A CAUSE FOR RESIGNATION?

On another point, the PAP that has built its reputation on high standards of probity, propriety, and personal conduct, has also been bruised by developments in its camp over the past few weeks.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is the PAP secretary-general, said it had saddened him "to discover that these two PAP MPs have fallen short of the high standards of propriety and personal conduct that we expect from all PAP MPs".

Given that Mr Tan was Speaker, this means that the ability to

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remain impartial in the House was, at least technically, compromised well before the hot mic incident criticising WP MP Jamus Lim took place. What needs to be established is whether it had indeed been compromised in relation to his treatment of fellow parliamentarian Cheng.

On the other hand, the WP did not address the issue of the extramarital affair directly at its media conference announcing the resignations.

Instead, the message was more about the fact that Mr Perera and Ms Seah had not been honest with the leaders when they were asked whether there was any basis to the allegations about their affair.

WP secretary-general Pritam Singh revealed only that the WP leaders did persist in asking Mr Perera and Ms Seah if there was any truth to the allegations, but he did not provide a definitive statement on his party's stance on extramarital affairs among its members and parliamentarians.

What Mr Singh did refer to was the pain that the Perera-Seah affair must have caused the families concerned and when such affairs happen, identifying with that as a married man himself.

Hence, there was the empathy for the affected families and an appeal to the public to let the matter rest now. When asked, he did not suggest that there was a party line on such affairs, but offered a line on party discipline and accountability to the leadership as the central issue at hand.

He also delivered a more general statement that he wanted his party's parliamentarians to do Singapore proud and be committed to serving Parliament

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and Singaporeans well.

It would be useful to learn in the coming days if this is the correct reading of the differences in how the parties view the issue: Is private conduct, such as that engaged in by the four party members, something that is cause for formal discipline within the parties? Is it only a problem if it bleeds into formal public duty or is it a non-negotiable?

## LEADERS CHASING LEADS, MANAGING THE DAMAGE

On the detailed management of the problems, in the PAP's case, the parliamentarians involved admitted to the extramarital affair but lied about terminating it. Questions have been raised as to why such leeway was given since its discovery after the 2020 General Election, and even after February 2023, when firm action is expected by the public, given the PAP's no-nonsense reputation.

PM Lee has tried to explain it and we can expect more to be said in a ministerial statement when Parliament sits in early August.

In the WP's case, the members denied it right up to the point when the evidence was made public. And it is of concern to think that Mr Perera was going to victimise his driver, not only by sacking him but checking on legal action in relation to what was presented as a baseless allegation.

After all, we are to believe that Mr Singh and his senior colleagues seemed to have been taken in by claims by Mr Perera that the whistleblower, his driver, was a disgruntled employee, and did not question the latter directly.

In addition, perhaps in due course, we will learn if Ms Seah told the party about the affair when she is said to have confessed it to her family after it

ended, or truly kept its leaders in the dark.

## RECOVERY AND DOING BETTER FOR PARTIES AND NATION

Supporters of both parties will be disappointed, but because the next general election is still a while away, there is a lot that the parties can do to rebuild their reputation, their standing with voters, not only by the quality and lived-out values of their candidates but also through how the candidates have engaged and served them, practically.

Meanwhile, it was good that WP chairman Sylvia Lim spoke specifically about how the constituents in Aljunied GRC, where she is an MP, will continue to be served. It assures them that this has been thought about.

It is not new territory of course as MPs in Sengkang are already filling the gap left by the resignation of Ms Raeesah Khan for misleading Parliament in alleging misconduct by the police. Mr Faisal Manap from Aljunied GRC is doing double-duty in Sengkang GRC for minority representation there.

In terms of the future of Aljunied GRC, there is worry about how the issue of costs for improper payments by Ms Lim in relation to historical town council matters in Aljunied GRC will affect her standing, and how the investigations on Mr Pritam Singh in relation to the Raeesah Khan issue is going to affect him too.

This seems perilous.

We do not know yet how this could affect the representation of and service to Aljunied constituents but surely the WP will be considering various scenarios in its forward-planning.

Surely this is the time for the WP's volunteers and also prospective candidates to rise up. It is unlikely that the battle-hardened WP will waste a crisis. WP secretary-general Singh did say that the search for good



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announcing the resignations of Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin and Tampines GRC MP Cheng Li Hui at a press conference on Monday. The PAP has been bruised by developments in its camp over the past few weeks. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO



Leader of the Opposition and WP secretary-general Pritam Singh announcing the resignations of MP Leon Perera and senior leader Nicole Seah to the media on Wednesday. For the WP, it is the loss of a second of only 10 duly elected MPs after GE2020. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

candidates is ongoing. Given what has happened, volunteers hoping to stand will be far more cautious in making a decision to put themselves forward, and the leaders, equally careful in their choices.

While case histories will always be instructive, will the WP's internal codes of conduct be revised to institutionalise its expectations of parliamentarians?

The PAP is undoubtedly impacted by the recent arrest of

Transport Minister S. Iswaran by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). If he is proven guilty, it will also deal a big blow to the ruling party, from losing an anchor minister in the West Coast GRC.

With the unequivocal line of its party secretary-general on honesty and personal conduct in recent days, there could be no doubt about the expectations and level of scrutiny that citizens will place on party leaders and their

every action going forward.

It has various codes of conduct but yet again, all parts – rules, values, the right people, and peer pressure – have to be in place for a strong political ecosystem to prevail.

Generally, those who wish to be our representatives in Parliament will be reminded to do so for the right reasons, that matters of personal conduct are important in Singapore; that honesty between party members and leaders,

parliamentarians and citizens, spouses and family members, is expected.

These are teachable moments for politics and governance in Singapore and if absorbed for what they are, will serve us well in the future, when the hurt is over.

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