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ANNIVERSARIES

By LIM YAN LIANG

AS YOU raise a toast to 50 years of the Republic of Singapore, consider this: there was a time when the country was under Japanese control. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the surrender of the Japanese following World War II. A different outcome could

have led to a very different present.

Another key anniversary of geopolitical conflict, one that gives cause to reflect on the importance of good bilateral ties, looms: March 10, 1965, when Macdonald House in Orchard Road was bombed. Fifty years ago, two Indonesian saboteurs set off bombs that killed three people and injured more than 30 at the height of the Konfrontasi campaign of terror, when Indonesia opposed the formation of the federation of Malaysia.

The Government will this year unveil a memorial to the bombing victims, located close to Macdonald House. Another historic marker – commemorating the 25th anniversary of the end of the communism threat here – was unveiled last month at Esplanade Park.

Heritage events in the pipeline are also sure to

reference the Maria Hertogh riots and Hock Lee bus riots, which happened 65 and 60 years ago respectively.

Capping off all the heritage events for Singapore's own special 50th anniversary is the Jubilee Walk in November that will stretch across the civic district from the Merlion Park to Marina Promenade.

Historians say the full slate of events will hopefully get Singaporeans to take stock of the nation's past and achievements, while thinking about the path Singapore should take going forward.

But there is a risk that the ceaseless calendar of heritage events will cause Singaporeans to tune out, warns history professor Chua Ai Lin.

"There is so much happening this year that there is going to be severe audience fatigue," she says.

How these anniversaries are

celebrated – and if these events and exhibitions can provide fresh insights into hitherto-unknown areas of local history – will make the difference between whether participants gain anything from them or not, she adds.

An IremembersG project that documents the little-known history of kampungs on Pulau Brani, for example, was a project that worked in getting Singaporeans curious about finding out more, she says.

"This is the moment when all these things are being kickstarted, and hopefully people aren't just doing it for the sake of ticking off a box," says Prof Chua.

"It's an opportunity to actually open a door to realising how rich and meaningful the past is to our sense of ourselves in the present," she adds, drawing parallels with how national initiatives such as the Singapore Memory Project have



Macdonald House in Orchard Road after the bombing by two Indonesian saboteurs on March 10, 1965, at the height of the Konfrontasi. Three people were killed and more than 30 injured. ST FILE PHOTO

changed the way the man in the street values the past.

On the political front comes an anniversary of a different sort: the Nominated MP (NMP) scheme turns 25 this March.

In 1990, a constitutional amendment allowed for the appointment of non-elected MPs to provide alternative views in the House.

The scheme, a uniquely Singaporean spin on the British parliamentary system, was judged enough of a success that, five years ago, the law was again changed to make NMPs a

permanent feature of the political landscape here.

Before that, every time Parliament had to decide if it wanted to have NMPs.

A major criticism of the scheme when it was originally mooted was that it was undemocratic, and that NMPs represented no one but themselves.

But precisely because of this, NMPs are generally non-partisan and unburdened with having to adhere to party discipline, says Singapore Management University law don and former NMP Eugene Tan.

"If you look at the various NMPs since 1990, some issues which were not 'politically lucrative' might not otherwise have been raised and debated in Parliament," he says.

These include the maintenance of parents' legislation (Valter Woods), domestic violence legislation

(Kanwaljit Soin), Singapore's commitment to the principles enshrined in the National Pledge (Viswa Sadasiyan), and Section 377A of the Penal Code (Siew Kum Hong and Thio Li-ann), says Prof Tan.

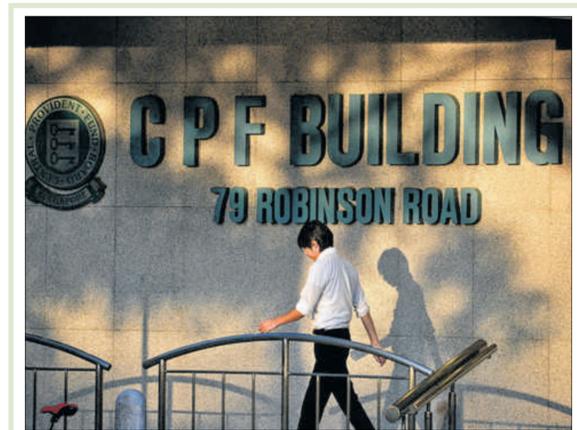
He adds: "Even where issues are politically germane to the ruling party and the Opposition, NMPs bring different perspectives to the debates, which helps to broaden the discourse beyond partisanship."

The Straits Times is itself in a reflective mood this year, as it turns 170. The newspaper will curate an exhibition on Singapore's history using pages and photos from the paper's archive (starting July 15, at the ArtScience Museum), while correspondents and editors will speak directly with readers in a series of forums on topics ranging from education to the future of the nation.

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Other red-letter events in 2015

Singapore may be in party mode to mark 50 years of independence, but there are key political milestones to note as well. Insight runs through the A-E of these.



This could be the year of big CPF changes. The Government is seeking feedback on how to enhance the CPF system, and Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin has mooted having different Minimum Sums. PHOTO: KIA CHEE SIONG

B

BUDGET 2015

AS ALWAYS, there will be a Budget this year – Feb 23 is the date – but the question on everyone's lips is: Will it be a Jubilee Budget and, if so, of what sort?

"That is, will it be a Budget that ties in with the jubilee sense of making history, so people talk about it for years to come?"

Or will it announce some birthday largesse to add to the party mood?

Or will it simply be business as usual?

A looming general election and 50 years of success mean Singaporeans of all stripes will be looking to receive a hongbao this year, says political scientist Lam Peng Er of the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute.

"You want to tweak Central Provident Fund – what about housewives? You've provided for the pioneer generation – what about the young?" he asks.

"The challenge lies in fine-tuning how they distribute the benefits so Singaporeans perceive it to be fair."

Just before the last general election in 2011, the

Government disbursed a one-off raft of goodies worth \$3.2 billion in that year's Budget. Partaking of what was called the Grow & Share Package, a majority of Singaporeans received about \$800 in growth dividends, while those who had completed national service received \$100 more.

However, if this year's Budget is to be one that has something of the landmark about it, this could be the year of significant CPF adjustments.

With the Government now soliciting feedback on how to enhance the CPF system, and Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin recently mooted the idea of adjusting the Minimum Sums to cater to different needs, changes to one of Singapore's most enduring social policies appear inevitable.

As Mr Tay Hong Beng, head of tax at KPMG in Singapore, puts it: "The introduction of Workfare and MediShield Life addresses two key structural issues in the economy: income inequality and medical coverage", leaving financial security in retirement as the final "critical structural issue" to be addressed.

The Government could also be thinking of enhancing the Supplementary Retirement Scheme to boost savings and retirement adequacy, he adds.

"As the second pillar of the retirement framework for Singaporeans, the Government can consider allowing such contributions to be used for the payment of housing loans and medical costs," he says.

As for the business-as-usual approach, this year's Budget is likely to continue the

Government's "new way forward" of providing greater social support for Singaporeans, as well as pressing on with restructuring the economy and making workers more productive.

Recent Budgets have introduced initiatives to give more aid to various groups in society – including people with disabilities, young families and the elderly – and to spur local companies to become more productive.

Support for the elderly was a particular focus of last year's Budget, when the \$8 billion Pioneer Generation Package was announced. A Silver Support scheme providing low-income elderly folk with an annual payout will be introduced in this year's Budget, PM Lee said in his National Day Rally speech last year.

With these segments of the population covered, political watchers and economists said this year's Budget – likely to be debated over the first two weeks of March – will perhaps focus on the middle-income, particularly the "sandwiched class" squeezed by rising costs.

The Government might do this by adjusting policies to provide higher child tax relief, maid relief for singles taking care of their parents, and cash allowances for families based on number of children, and by broadening temporary financial assistance schemes to cover unemployed professionals and help them cope with home loans and medical expenses, says KPMG's Mr Tay.

So business as usual – but with benefits? Only time will tell.

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Bus commuters can expect shorter wait times, as the billion-dollar Bus Service Enhancement Programme putting 1,000 government-funded buses on the roads by 2017 will be well under way this year. ST FILE PHOTO

C

CONNECTIVITY

FOR much of Singapore's last 50 years, when it comes to transport, the car has been king. But in 2015, train and bus users are in the driver's seat.

All major forms of public transit infrastructure, plus cycling, are set for upgrades.

More trains will be added in batches between this year and 2019. When completed, 57 new trains will ply the North-South and East-West Lines, boosting rail network capacity by about 40 per cent.

The first of 18 new North East Line (NEL) and 24 new Circle Line trains will also be progressively put into service from the middle of this year.

Overhauls at Clementi, Commonwealth and Queenstown MRT stations this year will add new pedestrian link bridges to improve access, on top of new station entrances, fare gates and ticketing machines.

Work at the three stations is expected to be completed by mid-year.

By year's end, commuters waiting for trains on the platforms of 32 stations will also have access to free Wi-Fi,

including all on the NEL, and Ang Mo Kio, Bedok, Bukit Batok, Buona Vista, Choa Chu Kang, Clementi, Eunos, Jurong East, Khatib, Paya Lebar, Sembawang and Yishun.

Bus commuters can expect shorter wait times, as the billion-dollar Bus Service Enhancement Programme putting 1,000 government-funded buses on the roads by 2017 will be well under way.

The original plan announced in 2012 to add 550 buses to roads here was doubled to 1,000 last year, and about half of the 450 additional buses are expected to start running this year.

Buses will also have priority use of over 200km of dedicated lanes by year's end, while the Mandatory Give Way to Buses Scheme will be expanded from 300 to 370 bus stops islandwide.

Commuters can also look forward to a new integrated transport hub in Joo Koon that is expected to be completed this year. Such hubs link a bus interchange and an MRT station with adjacent commercial developments.

When completed, there will be nine such facilities.

A total of 50km of intra-town cycling path networks will also be completed in seven HDB towns this year, while another 10km will be made available within Marina Bay.

Political watchers tell Insight the Government wants to show it is capable of tackling hot-button issues – such as transport woes – that soured the ground for it in GE 2011 when the PAP's vote share slid to 60.1 per cent, the lowest since independence.

The improvements would allow the Government to present a brighter report card to voters.

"The question-mark is whether the ground will still be as sour as in 2011, although there has been much made to deal with issues like housing prices and the number of buses on the road," says political scientist Lam Peng Er of the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute.

While the upgrades and additions will reduce wait times and increase convenience, the overarching aim is to get people to switch from private vehicles to public transport, says MP Ang Hin Kee, who is on the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Transport.

"To get people to use more public transport, you have to cover the whole spectrum of infrastructure, such as sheltered walkways and making it more convenient to reach the nodes," he notes.

Commuters will also be keeping a close eye on fares, with the annual public transport fare review now under way. Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew has said any rise – expected to take effect from April, when approved – will be capped at 2.8 per cent, lower than last year's 3.2 per cent cap.

But with oil prices falling substantially, any increase should be minimal, says fellow GPC member Seng Han Thong.

A new bus contracting model being launched this year will also raise commuters' expectations of better service, adds Mr Seng.

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The 25th ASEAN Summit was held in Myanmar last November. Singapore and its neighbours will want to cap off a year of reaffirmed ties by ushering in a credible Asean Community, says senior diplomat Ong Keng Yong. PHOTO: REUTERS

D

DIPLOMACY

SINGAPORE'S golden jubilee also coincides with important milestones in its relations with many countries as a sovereign nation, even as it joins nine close neighbours to celebrate the creation of a much closer-knit Asean Community at year-end.

The island will renew 50 years of ties with more than a dozen countries, including Britain, India, Germany and Australia and neighbours like Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia, following its traumatic split with its closest neighbour in 1965.

And 50 years after Singapore parted company with Malaysia, the relationship has matured into a good one, said Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's most important foreign policy achievement is in our relations with Malaysia," says Prof Koh, pointing to how both sides have resolved the longstanding dispute over Malaysian Railway land, thereby unlocking the door to new areas of cooperation, such

as a rail link between Singapore and Johor Bahru.

"The overall relationship is good," he tells Insight, with Malaysia among Singapore's largest trading partners and Singapore among Malaysia's largest foreign investors.

"Singapore is also Malaysia's largest source of tourists."

Aside from renewed ties with Malaysia, this year will see high-level visits and diplomatic exchanges aplenty: President Tony Tan Keng Yam and Indian President Pranab Mukherjee will make reciprocal visits to mark the 50th anniversary of bilateral ties.

Dr Tan will also visit South Korea and China to mark 40 and 25 years of diplomatic ties respectively.

Singapore-China ties will feature prominently this year, and a third government-to-government project could be launched this year to mark a quarter century of relations.

Diplomats here will certainly be looking at ways to make hay while the sun shines, harnessing the feel-good atmosphere of mature ties to increase the tempo for treaties and partnerships that are still being negotiated, analysts add.

One such agreement is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an ambitious mega-trade pact that aims to build on existing free-trade agreements between Asean and six of its key partners: China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

While the multilateral agreement seeks to create a free-trade area covering the Asia-Pacific, negotiations are

slow as multiple partners and sectors are involved.

"Apart from renewing the excellent ties that we have with China and India, the hope is we can also get the Chinese and the Indians to exert a bit more to move forward on cooperation with Asean, particularly on the RCEP," says senior diplomat Ong Keng Yong.

Singapore, long regarded as a strong advocate for open markets and trade liberalisation, will be keen to ensure there is political will among the 16 countries to work towards getting the partnership done sooner, rather than later, he adds.

"The thinking within Asean is that we've grown well individually and bilaterally, but now maybe we can get more value by working together in a regional context, multilaterally," he says.

Within the grouping, Singapore and its neighbours will also want to cap off a year of reaffirmed ties by ushering in a credible Asean Community, says Mr Ong. To be launched by year's end, it aims to create a more economically integrated Asean.

Chief among the goals that Asean is working towards is a comprehensive open-skies agreement that will liberalise the region's aviation markets.

A mature and frank relationship between Singapore and various countries can only help achieve these goals, adds Mr Ong.

"There is a friendship that has been laid down, and the question now is how do we get more value out of each relationship," he says.

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A People's Action Party rally in Aljunied GRC in the 2011 general election. Most political pundits Insight spoke to agree that the next general election will happen by mid-2016. ST FILE PHOTO

E

ELECTIONS?

SIXTY years after the landmark 1955 elections that saw Singaporeans share executive power with the British colonial authorities, Singapore is looking at yet another watershed General Election (GE).

No one knows when the next GE will be called – that is solely at the discretion of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong – but it must be held by January 2017 at the latest.

What is known is that PM Lee considers the coming hustings a "deadly serious fight". At the People's Action Party's 60th anniversary rally last month, he gave a wake-up call by raising the spectre of a freak election result that could see the party lose power.

"It will be about who forms the government, not how many seats the opposition gets," Mr Lee said, framing the contest as an existential one, since every seat is likely to be challenged.

While the Prime Minister has sounded the first rallying cry, the opposition has also been gearing up.

The Workers' Party has been on regular walkabouts to meet

residents, and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) is launching its GE campaign today.

While many political pundits Insight spoke to were unwilling to bet on whether a general election will be held this year or next, most agree it will happen by mid-2016.

Aside from the fact that leaving it till late 2016 gives the ruling party little room to manoeuvre – and affords the opposition time to prepare – most observers say the Government is likely to capitalise on the upbeat mood provided by a jubilee year.

Most also expect a raft of pre-election sweeteners in next month's Budget.

Dr Derek da Cunha, the author of Breakthrough: Roadmap For Singapore's Political Future, published after GE2011, expects most sweeteners to be in the Budget, with the rest announced in conjunction with Singapore's 50th National Day.

"If the GE is called this year, the PAP will benefit somewhat from the feel-good factor generated by the SG50 celebrations plus giveaways it is prepared to provide the electorate in commemorating that milestone," he says.

"However, the Government could well lose control of events if the election is delayed till next year", when such feelings are forgotten, he adds.

Former NMP and law professor Eugene Tan agrees: "After the close of SG50 celebrations, and assuming that it is well-received and the contributions of past and present Singaporeans to nation-building appropriately recognised, there is a window

of up to six months where the faint glow effect will linger and could result in the ground being as sweet as it can be for the PAP."

Even then, this might not translate into a better electoral performance for the ruling party, says Prof Tan, because Singaporeans' expectations have grown, with an appreciation for a more competitive political landscape.

Many of the young, for example, want a society that allows for divergent voices and alternative views to be heard, says political scientist Lam Peng Er of the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute.

This generation of Singaporeans will no longer abide by the social contract forged between the PAP and their parents, he adds. "Once your stomach is filled, you have a job and a roof over your head, you'll have higher aspirations – concern for the environment, a voice for the underdog, and so on," says Dr Lam.

"There's no magic wand – you can double the number of buses, reduce immigration and fine-tune HDB prices, but the fact is that there's been a structural change in the political culture here."

Still, while there is no magic wand, SG50 is Singapore's coming-of-age party, and will inspire Singaporeans to be more engaged in the issues of the day, says Prof Tan.

"The biggest sweetener this year would be our celebrations of 50 years of independence – one that is inclusive, reflective yet forward-looking, and growing the confidence of Singaporeans," he says.

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