

Launch of a Primer on Singapore's Parliamentary Elections

By Andrew Yeo
IPS Research Assistant

Last month before the September 11 polls, the SMU Apolitical Society launched a primer on Singapore's parliamentary elections. [A Guide to General Elections in Singapore](#) is a succinct 64-page book edited by Grace Morgan, a graduate from the SMU School of Law, and includes, among other things, information on the major political parties in Singapore and an introduction to voting systems. Written in an easy-to-understand manner, the booklet also includes a glossary of key terms and acronyms used in discussions on the General Election, and is the second publication by the student group after [The Singapore Constitution: A Brief Introduction](#) was published in January 2014.

IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh took part in a discussion panel held at the launch of the book on 31 August 2015 at the Singapore Management University (SMU) Labs. The other speakers on the panel were P N Balji, former editor-in-chief of *TODAY* newspaper, and Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan and Assistant Professor of Law Jack Lee, both from the SMU School of Law.

Ms Morgan began the session by explaining the rationale for the project. It was to illuminate the significance of the vote and the ability to choose our leaders and how our society could be run, she said. She said that one need not be a voter to be a part of the proceedings. Recalling her experience in 2011 when she was ineligible to vote, she said that she and her friends had made the effort to go down to the polling stations to soak in the atmosphere of the proceedings. Her enthusiasm, she amusingly recounted, was subsequently captured in a newspaper report about the political awakening of youths in Singapore.

Discussion

Dr Koh began the discussion by making a few observations of the political landscape after the last general election. She cited statements by the leaders of the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP) after the 2011 election. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the PAP's secretary-general, had noted the changed voter sentiment and the drop in support from the electorate, and had said that soul-searching was required. Stalwarts from the PAP team had also stepped down from key positions after the election. WP secretary-general Low Thia Kiang, upon winning Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC), had referred to the victory as a political landmark in Singapore.

Dr Koh noted that there seemed to be equal support for an efficient government, as well as for an opposition to provide checks and balances to the incumbent party. The latter value, she noted, was especially regarded as important by the younger people and those from a higher socio-economic background. The opposition, she observed, were responding to this sociological phenomena. There were also discernible trends among the different opposition parties. The WP was getting more credentialed candidates, the Singapore Democratic Party has been very systematic in both policies and politics, and the Singapore People's Party had a key focus on party branding, she said.

Associate Professor Tan followed up by responding to commentators who had referred to the 2011 election as a "watershed" one. He expressed scepticism at this view, saying instead that the coming 2015 election would be the watershed election. He made a further political forecast, saying that after the coming election, some political parties might become irrelevant in Singapore's future political landscape.

Assistant Professor Lee began his discussion by elaborating on electoral rules. Bringing forth legal definitions of what a party political film, election advertising, and an election survey constituted, he highlighted recent examples in which these rules were breached. While parties such as the Singapore Democratic Party and *The Straits Times* have breached these rules before, he said that the police have generally been quite lenient.

Mr Balji made a number of observations of the media landscape in Singapore and its coverage of the election. He noted the mainstream media's coverage of the 2011 General Election as "the boldest coverage in recent times"; this was despite the Singapore Press Holdings being traditionally helmed by a former PAP minister. He described what he was reading more recently in the papers as being "initially tepid, but now getting slightly better", referring to interviews with several opposition candidates as a sign of a more positive media climate. The biggest stakeholder in the media, he said, is the government, which has to handle its relationship with the media with sophistication, so as not to undermine its credibility. This is crucial, he said, as those who unsubscribe from the papers do not return.

Question-and-Answer Session

An audience member asked if the case of teen blogger Amos Yee would have an impact on GE2015. Mr Balji, Dr Koh and Assistant Professor Lee said no, but each gave different reasons. Dr Koh said that there were two things to note: First, Amos had unfortunately touched on religion in his controversial YouTube video, hence the video was not only insensitive to supporters of Lee Kuan Yew (who Yee criticised), but also to the followers of Christianity. Second, Amos had been unapologetic throughout the drama and had not shown remorse.

Assistant Professor Lee agreed, saying that Amos had done himself no favours, but also said that one could ask if the saga had been blown out of proportion and if it should have even been an issue in the first place. Mr Balji, while agreeing that the media's portrayal of Amos was not an issue the electorate would be concerned about, said that it was unnecessary to prosecute the boy, whom he described as creative and intelligent.

Another audience member asked about the PAP's political strategy, and whether their incessant attacking of the Workers' Party over municipal issues was part of their political plan. Mr Balji agreed that it was part of their strategy, and further pointed to how the National Day Rally had read like a manifesto. Dr Koh said that it was the strategy of opposition parties to go for national issues, but for the PAP to focus on local issues, especially because there would be time before the election period to raise national issues.

Referring to what has been called the by-election strategy — where the opposition contests in only a limited amount of seats so that the electorate could vote for them without worrying about a change in government — she described the PAP's municipal strategy as a counter to that. Assistant Professor Lee questioned the PAP's constant harping on the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) issue as potentially being seen as bullying or irresponsible. He described Workers' Party Chairperson Sylvia Lim's response to the issue as extremely detailed, which was good, but potentially confusing to the average reader. Associate Professor Eugene Tan ended the afternoon's proceedings by challenging SMU Apolitical Society to complete the trinity of books by compiling an edition on the Presidential Elections, as the next Presidential Election should take place before 2017.

Andrew Yeo is Research Assistant (Special Projects) at IPS.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2015 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.