

Ruling People's Action Party losing some credibility among Singaporeans, survey finds

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Fewer Singaporeans consider the ruling People's Action Party to be credible after the party's worst election results since independence, a survey showed Friday.

About 73 percent of those polled agreed or strongly agreed that the PAP is a credible party, down from 87 percent in 2006, according to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies, a think-tank within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

"The political consciousness of Singaporeans has changed very radically," said Chua Beng Huat, a sociology professor at NUS. "The PAP will probably continue to be the dominant party for the next twenty years, but we're moving toward a more normal, democratic culture."

The PAP has dominated Singapore political life since the country split from Malaysia in 1965. It won 60 percent of overall votes in a parliamentary election May 7, the lowest percentage since independence, while the Workers Party won six of 87 parliament seats, the most by an opposition party since the PAP came to power.

Voter discontent has grown in recent years as housing prices soared while wages stagnated amid a surge in foreign workers. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pledged after the vote to reconsider PAP policies and governing style, and ordered a review of minister salaries, which are among the highest in the world.

But the government so far hasn't expressed plans to make fundamental changes, such as establishing a minimum salary or easing the city-state's economic dependence on foreign workers.

"The election was a warning to the PAP not to be complacent and to seek new ways to reconnect to a younger and more demanding electorate," said Lam Peng Er, senior research fellow at the East Asian Institute. "But it's unclear whether the PAP will re-examine its economic model of development and be more open and transparent in policymaking to citizens."

The survey showed the most important election issues were the cost of living, efficient government and checks and balances in Parliament.

The telephone survey of 2,080 people aged 21 and above was conducted May 8-20. No margin of error was given. Normally, a poll that size would have an error margin of about 3 percentage points.

During the election campaign some PAP leaders acknowledged the perception that they sometimes govern in an arrogant or high-handed manner. Lee offered a rare public apology for PAP mistakes days before the vote.

However, some PAP leaders reject criticism that they are out of touch with the struggles of ordinary Singaporeans.

"When people say that the members of Parliament are disconnected from the ground, or don't want to engage with the people, I find it hard to believe," PAP Member of Parliament Vikram Nair said in a speech at a conference hosted by IPS. "We do what we think is right and sometimes, people won't be happy."

"Don't focus too much on the 40 percent that didn't vote for you," he said. "We have to remember and keep in mind the interests of the 60 percent that did."

Perhaps the biggest change since the election was the resignation of Lee Kuan Yew from the cabinet. The 87-year-old Lee, who is Lee Hsien Loong's father, was prime minister from 1959 to 1990 and subsequently held senior cabinet positions until May.

The senior Lee is credited with guiding the rise of Singapore from a sleepy port town into one of the richest and safest countries in the world. He also jailed some political rivals for years without trial and sued other opponents into bankruptcy with defamation cases. That helped isolate the opposition, which has just begun to emerge.

"One of the factors that will contribute to Singapore's road to democracy is the retirement of Lee Kuan Yew," Chua said. "A lot of the authoritarian atmosphere is the result of that one man's mentality."