

N-Day Rally may focus on social issues

Commentators see need for PM to move away from primarily economic narrative used in previous years

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The National Day Rally this weekend could focus more on social issues rather than economic ones, according to observers whom BT spoke to.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has invited three ministers from the younger generation of Singapore's political leadership to share their perspectives at the rally on Sunday evening. But Singaporeans may expect more than just a change in the format of the speech as commentators whom BT spoke to highlighted the need to move away from the primarily economic narrative used in previous years.

Nominated Member of Parliament and associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, Eugene Tan, would like to see more aspirational issues dominate the proceedings at the rally rather than economic discussions.

"As a nation, we are at the crossroads - politically, economically and socially - and (we) need to forge a new consensus amid greater diversity and complexity in our society. I hope the start of the national conversation will not dwell on economic issues," said Mr Tan.

It is also important for the rally to touch on the social compact in light of Singapore's widening income divide despite its economic progress, said Mr Tan, as there is a need to assure Singaporeans, especially the less fortunate, that they will receive help.

Mr Tan said that it may be important also to address the current framework of social safety nets, a point reiterated by a self-help group leader whom BT spoke to. "I hope to see the need for the social service schemes and other support structures addressed to take into account the new sub-group of the population who may have come into focus needing help," said T Raja Segar, chief executive officer of the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda).

Mr Raja also pointed out that it may not be necessarily true that what is good for the country in the long run is also good for individual citizens in the short term, and therefore there should be a deviation from using national economic narratives alone to communicate policies. "No amount of explanation on long-term sustainability of the nation as a competitive environment is going to mitigate the feeling of a less successful life now."

The population issue is another area that some observers feel could be given emphasis at the rally speeches.

Member of Parliament for Ang Mo Kio GRC Inderjit Singh said that it was necessary for the prime minister to provide comfort on population issues so that Singaporeans will not feel that they are worse off, and to improve the value of citizenship for concerned Singaporeans.

"It is also not clear if the government's key strategy to grow the population is through immigration or procreation. If it is the latter, then they will have to be more clear on that - and I expect a more serious statement at the rally to reflect that."

Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, is also certain that the population debate would feature in Sunday's speeches in light of the White Paper on that topic that the government will be presenting at the end of the year. "I would also not be surprised if the main message would be about the difficult, mutually conflicting demands that we face as a country - we expect nothing less than growth, wage increases and improvements in our quality of life year-on-year, but we also wish to dial down on labour, be it low skilled to high skilled and high value, the latter being evidenced by the calls for tempering the immigration numbers."

Although the balanced tilted in favour of more coverage on social issues, some still felt that economic perspectives would be present in the rally speeches. "The economy, a staple topic in every rally speech, will be discussed but it will be linked up with the demographic challenges," said Mr Tan.

Others felt that more specific measures needed to be announced for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). "There is a big struggle for SMEs in terms of cost pressures and the availability of resources," said Mr Singh.

The Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI) president, Abdul Rohim Sarip, hoped that the prime minister would take a bolder approach in addressing certain issues affecting SMEs, especially the implications of reducing the number of foreign workers. "Businesses can expect higher costs as well as the increasing need to innovate. Many businesses hope for further government assistance and incentives to address the current challenges; otherwise, SMEs will have to relocate or even close down."