



Are We Ready for Change?

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Barely a month after GE2011, we have seen a number of changes take place. To highlight three of them, first came the Cabinet reshuffle with the retirement of the two former prime ministers, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and that of other Cabinet ministers who had been targeted in the opposition's campaigns: Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, Mah Bow Tan and Raymond Lim. Political 'newbies', namely Heng Swee Keat and Chan Chun Sing were given ministerial appointments, and there are fresh faces among the Ministers of State and parliamentary secretaries. This signals that a renewal of the People's Action Party (PAP) leadership has taken place and suggests that a reformist agenda is firmly afoot. Second, social media was a common platform where news, views and interviews were shared in the hustings. It gave those online a way to gauge how many felt like them. It was notable however that a lot of what was public tended to be against the incumbent PAP government and its candidates. Third, the myth about politically apathetic Singaporeans was most definitely debunked, as public intellectuals Ho Kwon Ping and Catherine Lim have also noted. At the end of it, 'transformation' became a buzzword. What else might this 'transforming' touch apply to?

The new government will have to consider how best to engage citizens beyond the ballot box. The process of accessing and disseminating information from and to the government needs review. In online discussions, it would seem that whatever is put out as the first piece of 'information' is often deemed to be accurate and discussions flow from it. Offline discussions may be then informed by this. As a result, when there are subsequent clarifications, new information may be deemed 'less accurate' than what was put out earlier, or interpreted to justify the contrarian position to the earlier points. Often the vocal majority drown out the few who attempt to balance the discussion with more accurate information. The discussion of ministerial salaries is case in point. What the new government and netizens might consider is how to intervene if they wish before readers make up their minds on something based on what can sometimes be views not borne out by facts. Should it be done through official government channels? The last government indicated that the REACH website would be its official platform for feedback. However, there were at least two ministers who would put out their views directly to netizens and engage them occasionally. Should other netizens with contrarian views engage these exchanges directly at the risk of being flamed? Or should they do it on their own platforms? Or will we indeed see the development of sites that commit themselves to what might be 'facts of the matter'?

Perhaps there could be a review of how official information is conveyed, what types of information can be transmitted in less formal ways and where people can turn to for informed debate.

Beyond the realm of communications, there is the question on our model of governance. What do I mean? A colleague made an observation that captured the spirit of the 'government should do' phenomenon that seems to pervade the country at the moment: people do not carry umbrellas with them anymore as they are used to covered walkways that will lead them from point A to point B, from the bus-stop to their homes, from the MRT station to their workplaces. I wonder, if in this evolving political landscape, there will still be the constant expectation of what the 'government must do'. Perhaps, people have indirectly delegated their social responsibility to the political leaders and civil servants. Whatever policies are made and implemented, we still have to do our part and take personal responsibility for our actions and choices. How will the activism that was observed during the elections translate into personal action? As and when new spaces for citizen engagement emerge, will citizens be able to take things into their own hands and deal with issues that might crop up around them? Will the government find that it is in its interest to let them do so? More importantly, on issues where citizens have diverse needs and expectations, ideal outcomes that each of us wants may never materialise. Would we rather have a range of choices determined by public consensus and the bureaucracy, or would we prefer minimal government, minimal taxes and be allowed the resources to find our own solutions? What are the policy trade-offs we are willing to accept as the social compact is being renegotiated?

Going forward, we are likely to see more changes to the style and substance of the PAP-led government. There is likely to be increased public expectation of the opposition as they play their role of 'check and balance' to the government. Change takes time, especially when it is about mindset and value change. How tolerant will we be when mistakes are made as our system of political leadership evolves? In our engagement with our political leaders, we expect them to behave fairly and reasonably, but we must hold ourselves to the same standards. Are we, the people, ready for change?

Li Lin was the studio commentator for MediaCorp's Channel 8 Polling Night special. The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

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