

How the opposition was 'blown away' at GE2015: Academics weigh in "Pragmatic" voters flocked to the tried-and-tested People's Action Party, Singaporean academics theorised at an Institute of Policy Studies conference.

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SINGAPORE: Academics speaking at a post-General Election (GE) conference held by the Institute Policy of Studies on Wednesday (Nov 4) speculated on the reasons behind the People's Action Party's landslide win.

"In seeking to outflank the PAP, the Opposition ended up aggressively outflanking themselves," said Associate Professor Eugene Tan. "This drove conservative, middle-ground voters back into the arms of the tried-and-tested PAP."

As a result, a potential "watershed" election turned out to be a "flight to safety", Prof Tan said.

"The deep irony is that the electorate's very receptivity to more political competition contributed to an Opposition blowback, resulting in a PAP blowout win," he said. "In short, the Opposition was blown away. No one expected this, not even the PAP."

Prof Tan said that one of the mistakes the Opposition made was that it misread the electorate. "They attempted a time warp and sought to recreate the angst, anxiety and anger of GE 2011. But Lee Kuan Yew's passing in March was still fresh and had a sobering effect on voters," he said.

The Opposition's "fragmentation" was also "intensified by the large number of Opposition parties and candidates, and a desperation to be even more left-of-centre than the PAP," added Prof Tan.

"The Opposition was also perceived to be going into uncharted waters, perhaps even undermining Singapore."

"ME, MYSELF AND I"

For voters, there was the perception that much was at stake, exacerbated by the social media frenzy speculating a massive slide in support for the PAP, said Prof Tan. Adding to the mix, he pointed out, was the impact of economic challenges, regional security concerns and the haze descending on Singapore come Cooling-Off Day.

Another factor was the "overkill of bread and butter issues", according to Prof Tan.

Key issues brought up by almost all parties - the cost of living, foreign manpower, minimum wage, and population and immigration - all had individual implications for every voter, argued Prof Tan, which in turn could have reduced their willingness to devote money, time and ideas for the public good - what he called a "me, myself, and I mindset".

The result was that voters were reminded of where their priorities ought to lie, thus leading to a preference for the status quo and the tried-and-tested formula provided by the PAP.

Professor David Chan agreed, calling the electorate “principled and pragmatic”, as well as “present and future-oriented” - hence the overwhelming decision to retain the status quo once they saw what was at stake.

WHAT THE PAP GOT RIGHT

Prof Tan noted that the PAP’s regaining of electoral support was not a first. “It has a track record of clawing back seats and the overall popular vote when it mattered,” he said.

The election was won by the PAP not during the hustings, but with the work done between May 2011 and April 2015, Prof Tan said, identifying Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s apology at a GE2011 rally as “giving the appearance that the PAP has changed”.

The PAP’s trust, confidence, credibility, and goodwill may have eroded somewhat, but they still remain relatively robust, he added.

Prof Tan and Prof Chan also pointed to Dr Gillian Koh’s survey findings of a pragmatic, efficient PAP government and its “significant, fundamental” shifts in policy as key to winning voters over.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE OPPOSITION?

Prof Tan noted that the Opposition now had to awaken to the notion of a discerning electorate, one where not just any Opposition will do - especially when there are no clear, viable alternatives.

He said the Opposition can no longer rely on the “anti-PAP vote” and be “cesspools of political discontentment”.

He added: “They must get votes themselves. GE2020 is make-or-break, especially for non-Workers’ Party opposition, who might otherwise slide into irrelevance.”

Meanwhile, the PAP’s “reassuring victory” indicates the incumbents will have to “balance their instinctive quest for dominance with the electorate’s growing belief that political competition, diversity and contestation are critical ingredients”, Prof Tan commented.

In conclusion, he said that “Singaporeans were arguably the biggest winners of GE2015”.

“Voters concerns and needs have been addressed over the last four years, and are still being addressed. The ruling party responded to these real concerns,” he explained. “And in a sense the Government is reaching out more and rolling out more policies to cater to economic and demographic changes.”

Lauding the growing political consciousness, awareness and knowledge of Singaporean voters, Prof Tan said: “We are hard taskmasters. We want to be courted and not be taken for granted; we want to be persuaded that there is a need for viable opposition.”