

Expect robust debate on 'emotive' issues in Parliament, but consensus remains key: Analysts on President's Address

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With a greater number of opposition voices in Parliament, Singaporeans can expect more robust debate in Parliament on critical issues, but as President Halimah Yacob emphasised in the President's Address on Monday night (Aug 24), working towards building a broad consensus would be key, analysts told CNA following the opening session of the 14th Parliament.

Madam Halimah said in her speech to the 95 parliamentarians that while multiracialism is core to Singapore's identity, young Singaporeans prefer to talk about these issues more openly, and "in each generation, some will want to discuss sensitive issues afresh".

She also said that another potentially divisive issue - a sense of the growing competition Singaporeans face from work pass holders - will be addressed.

"These are emotive issues that can evoke strong reactions. Debates on such sensitive matters can easily become polarised. So as we open up more areas for meaningful discussion, Singaporeans must work even harder to listen to and understand one another," she said on Monday.

In the 25-minute address that laid out the priorities for the next term of Government, Mdm Halimah also said that securing jobs will remain the Government's priority for the next few years, and that social safety nets will be further strengthened in the "new normal" to come.

She also highlighted how Singapore is at an "inflection point" with new generations of Singaporeans coming of age and a new crop of leaders emerging.

Political analyst Eugene Tan, an Associate Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University, said that the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the need to address some outstanding issues and it is necessary to deal with them "resolutely and promptly".

"Whether it's about a fairer and more just society, local-foreign divide and immigration, and a more diverse, competitive and robust political system. How we respond will very much define our society in the post-COVID world and will determine if we can turn the crisis into opportunity," he said.

"We can't kick the can down the road and it's time to engage these emotive but critical issues."

TACKLING ISSUES HEAD ON

Mdm Halimah's speech also reflected how society has changed over the years, observed Dr Felix Tan, associate lecturer in international relations at SIM Global Education. He said this should provide the cue for House members to discuss discomfiting or previously off-limit topics.

"What stood out in her speech has been how this new government will have their hands full for the next five years dealing with a lot more social issues that a younger - and a more globalised - Singaporean mix are more concerned about," Dr Tan said.

"With the President making mention of such issues, perhaps, it is time that we should tackle these issues head on."

But most analysts said that with more open debate, polarisation and discord can ensue, resulting in a fractious society.

Mdm Halimah's reminder to work towards building a "broad consensus" was a common theme of presidential addresses past. But it is one worth bringing up again, said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy head of research at the Institute of Policy Studies.

"This is nonetheless an important point to reinforce given the larger group of opposition parliamentarians – 10 out of the twelve having been elected and from one party – the Workers' Party," Dr Koh said.

Of the 93 elected Members of Parliament sworn in on Monday, 10 are from the opposition Workers' Party (WP). Party chief Pritam Singh has been designated the official Leader of the Opposition. There are also two Non-Constituency MPs from the Progress Singapore Party for a total of 12 opposition voices in Parliament.

People's Action Party (PAP) MPs still dominate the House with 83 elected representatives.

FAULT LINES AND SCHISMS

The worry that Singapore will become more polarised is the "backdrop" to many of the themes raised by Mdm Halimah, said Mr Leonard Lim, country director for Singapore for government affairs consultancy Vriens & Partners.

Societal differences that can drive such divides include competition between locals and foreigners for jobs, differences relating to race and religion, and polarisation between the haves and have-nots due to slowing social mobility and the changing jobs landscape, he said. In addition, differing political inclinations could lead to "potential fractures".

"The implication is that in this term of government, leaders must do their utmost to keep citizens as united as possible, even as these fault-lines threaten the social fabric and cohesion that have been painstakingly built up over decades," he said.

There is potential for "ugly political schisms" with a larger opposition presence in Parliament, he added.

"But the message from the President to prevent Singapore going down this route was clear – Parliament should be a platform for robust but respectful debate, and speeches and rhetoric should not descend into ugly politicking."

For one observer, Mdm Halimah's call for Singaporeans to "learn to agree to disagree" was what stood out for him.

Associate Professor Chong Ja Ian from the National University of Singapore's Department of Political Science said the President's speech provided a "signal for Singaporeans and Parliament to begin talking about race and religion, something that mainstream political discourse has often tried to veer away from".

“Agreement may not come quickly, but they can only come if there is sufficient good-faith participation that come without some party wanting to force a preferred, preconceived approach over others,” he said.

He said that this would mean a focus on debating issues rigorously rather than launching personal attacks or insinuations of ill intent.

SMU’s Assoc Prof Tan said that it is clear the Government is prepared for robust debates, but ultimately, the imperative is for these to be purposeful.

“I don’t expect the tone and content (of parliamentary debates) to be significantly different in this new term. But I expect the quality of debates to improve in terms of better engagement of issues and for a toning down on the showmanship and occasional histrionics,” he said.

Political discourse will also be shaped partly by what happens outside the House with the onus now on citizens to be responsible in discussing such topics, said Mr Lim of Vriens and Partners, adding that hiding behind anonymity and reckless opinions should be called out.

“One hopes that reasonable questions on policy matters, as well as thoughtful criticism backed up by evidence, will be surfaced by Singaporeans, considered carefully by the Government, and ultimately lead to more robust policy outcomes,” he told CNA.