

**Channel News Asia, IPS seminar participants discuss political issues, problems of 'sandwich' generation, 19 Jan 2005**

SINGAPORE : It was straight talk on a variety of controversial issues for over 600 participants of a seminar organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, a Singapore think-tank.

Five months since Singapore witnessed a changeover in political leadership, just how much has the local political scene changed?

Academics agree they have seen a gradual shift towards a more consultative style in government, evidenced by the youth consultation process undertaken last year and also the heated debate on the casino proposal.

But this does not necessarily mean greater tolerance for an opposition voice.

Dr Derek Da Cunha, Senior Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said, "The main reason is that there are no real internal challenges to the ruling party. In particular, it does not face a threat from the political opposition. So within that context, the PAP (People's Action Party) can afford to open up much more in terms of giving freer reign to debate, being more accepting of criticism of certain aspects of its policy.

"I believe that these are certain concessions which the government is willing to make as long as people do not cross certain out of bound markers."

And with the general election looming, there are some concerns about the lack of an opposition.

Dr Gillian Koh, Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, said, "MPs represent views of constituents on the ground. The lack of an opposition means that some of those views might not filter to our highest forum of policy and law, that is they don't get to parliament.

"But I think that the PAP has also gone out of its way in creating mechanisms so that people who want to voice those alternative views can."

Another knotty issue tackled at the People and Partnerships seminar - problems faced by the "sandwich" generation.

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, said, "The problem is the sandwich generation, the people who have to look after the elderly as well as their long term adolescents.

"In Singapore, we want people to fulfil their family obligations and if we have the problem of the sandwich generation, people who are unable to look after their elderly and at the same time look after their younger generation, I think it would make it very difficult for the family to look after its obligations, even if it believes in family values and Confucianism."

Recent feedback by the "sandwich" generation also shows that job uncertainty due to keen global competition is a major concern. - CNA