

Observers say Singapore's future political system will be shaped by global trends

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Imelda Saad, 4 June 2009

Singapore's political system has seen several changes since it became a self-governing colony of Britain 50 years ago.

As Singapore reaches the half-century mark of self-governance, Channel NewsAsia finds out from Singaporeans what they think lies ahead for the country's political system.

From Third World to First World in just 50 years, Singapore has changed tremendously. But historians will tell you that the Singapore of the new millennium is more similar to the old Singapore than you may think.

Kwa Chong Guan, head of external programmes at S Rajaratnam School Of International Studies, said: "Singapore as a global city will increasingly look like Singapore in the 19th century with a transient migratory population... (of) only sojourners, and (they) stay for as long as they want to make money and fortune and then move on."

Hence, nurturing rootedness to the country - especially among a population with diverse views, cultures and values - will be a key priority for Singapore's leadership going ahead.

Observers said what this will translate to, in terms of political leadership, are people not only with a long-term vision but who also can connect with the ground and bridge divides.

"So I think, in addition to having that technocratic ability to translate those visions, you will return to the point of 50 years ago - of very high touch politics where political leaders... will be people who understand the ground, who go down to grassroots and translate the visions to the grassroots and empathise (with the people)... what are the hopes, the desires, the anxieties of people on the ground," said Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Dr Gillian Koh.

Observers said how the political system will evolve will depend on global trends.

Dr Koh offered two scenarios - either a more liberal government or political leaders who are grassroots mobilisers.

She said: "One is a system where you have a big picture and you leave everybody to themselves... a system where the rules of the game are very fair so that it's a highly liberalised picture.

"The second picture is where you have a more communitarian model where, yes, you will still have the strategic vision, but the focus is on community building so that everyone feels that they don't just have a place under the sun in Singapore, but they have a family (too)."

She added: "If we really face the full onslaught of the nightmare scenario on, say, climate change, this issue and its implications are not something that one government can deal with.

"It will take a global effort, a collective effort and if local governments are not able to respond, then you will have great dislocation... Then it'll be up to citizens to say, 'Well, my government is not satisfying my ideal of how this issue is being dealt with', then you'll have a different outcome.

"If people feel that their local government is capable of mitigating certain factors within the local setting, then they are going to want a government that's far more activist than a government that's far more hands off."

As for younger, educated and global Singaporeans, they said they want to be more involved in Singapore's political evolution.

Choo Zheng Xi, 23-year-old law undergraduate and chief editor of The Online Citizen, said: "I hope we evolve into a more representative democracy, more directly representative with a competitive political system and an engaged political culture where discussing politics becomes a part of our everyday lives and not just a show we watch on television."

"Increasingly the public is demanding greater transparency, greater accountability for the policies and things spent from government revenue and taxes. So, I think, as we move into a more educated community, I think we have to expect more diversity, as people are more exposed to different points of view and different values and beliefs," said Zaqy Mohamad, MP for Hong Kah GRC.

S Rajaratnam School Of International Studies' Mr Kwa agrees. He said: "As we move into a globalised city state where our younger generation are more aware of global values - norms of transparency, accountability of government, human rights and the whole issue of security of the individual rather than just the state... - then the government has to respond to these new trends and demands."

Their sentiments echo the findings of a snap poll on channelnewsasia.com.

Most respondents said they want a broader representation of political parties in Parliament and more consultation in the formulation of government policies.

So, how will the aspirations of younger Singaporeans impact Singapore's future political landscape?

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has already painted some broad strokes with the recently announced changes to the electoral system, aimed at allowing more diverse views including more opposition voices in Parliament.

These changes, observers said, will keep political leaders in sync with the aspirations of Singaporeans.