

PAP's election win more narrow than it seems: Ong Ye Kung

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SINGAPORE: The People's Action Party's (PAP) nearly 70 per cent vote triumph at the General Election (GE) is not the landslide it has been portrayed to be, said Acting Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung on Wednesday (Nov 4).

Speaking at a post-election conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Mr Ong said the results of the GE were encouraging to the PAP and provided an important lesson as it showed that voters agreed with the direction of its policies rolled out since 2011.

These include the ramping up of the Housing Development Board programme to build more flats, property cooling measures to reduce prices somewhat, the tightening of foreign inflows without freezing them, and the Pioneer Generation Package amongst others.

But Mr Ong, who is also Senior Minister of State for Defence, said the PAP's victory was more narrow than it seems. "Look at 2011 where the Opposition took six seats. Putting aside percentages and just looking at seats the PAP lost, in 2015 we also lost six - one SMC and one GRC," he said.

"In 2011, that result was celebrated with much jubilation amongst opposition supporters. So is it really that big a (PAP) victory in 2015?"

Added Mr Ong: "If you look in terms of percentage in hotly contested areas, there is no 10 per cent swing. It's about 5. And given SG50 and the Lee Kuan Yew effect ... I don't think it's a victory so jubilant to be celebrated.

"This, he claimed, was the reason why PAP Members of Parliament (MPs) are "taking nothing for granted". "There's no letting up. The next day we're already hitting the ground, doing Meet the People Sessions, block visits, engaging the ground, visiting coffee-shops - no letting up," stressed Mr Ong, who is an MP for Sembawang GRC.

"BECOMING A SHINING RED DOT"

When asked how he felt the PAP could have improved its campaign efforts during GE 2015, Mr Ong pointed to the recruitment of party helpers. "This time round, more and more young ones were writing in, wanting to help," he said. "We have to have receptacles and projects to engage these people so that they're on the ground with us, to see what we're doing day to day and over time become part of us and work together with us."

As for the party's plans moving forward, Mr Ong referred to a "balance of continuity and change". "Continuity in terms of our fundamental values and approach to governance ... such as zero tolerance to corruption, an open economy, emphasising on maintaining social cohesion and racial harmony," he described.

“But at the same time we must evolve with the times, our policies have to change with circumstances. Voters want contestation of ideas, not theatrics or parties attacking each other... the whole idea of debate should give us a stronger consensus to move forward so we should welcome ideas from all political parties whether white, blue, yellow or so on.”

But Mr Ong also warned against looking “at every issue through a political lens”. “There will be challenges over the next 50 years. It’s tempting to always politicise, but Singapore is too small and the world too dangerous for us to dissipate our energy through internal friction,” he said.

“Better to harness that energy into becoming a shining red dot for SG100.”

FROM CO-DRIVER TO SOLE DRIVER

Aside from Mr Ong, representatives from three other political parties - the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), the National Solidarity Party (NSP) and Singapore People's Party (SPP) - laid out their agenda for the next five years and touched on lessons learnt from the recent election. The Workers' Party declined the invitation to participate.

The National Solidarity Party (NSP) said the party's policy in the coming years would be rooted in one word - "relevance". Said NSP Secretary-General Lim Tean: “In the next five years, we intend to become very relevant, to rebuild ourselves ... Our messages and policies will radiate from values and principles which NSP stand for, foremost of which is the solemn duty of the Government to look after its own, and to create the right conditions for Singaporeans to lead better lives.”

He said the time is over where opposition parties could simply claim to offer checks and balances for the PAP. "Low Thia Kiang's analogy in 2011 of the opposition parties being co-drivers with PAP is no longer relevant. I believe in this new era, the opposition parties have got to be prepared to drive their own policy cars and to persuade voters to ride in their cars. It's no longer possible for us to hitch a ride on the policy car of the PAP and hope to modify a car that doesn't belong to us."

"FRIGHTENING LACK OF DISCUSSION"

The Singapore Democratic Party raised concern about the current platforms available for debates on issues concerning Singaporeans, saying there is a "frightening lack of discussion" over where the PAP is taking Singapore.

"We have serious issues that confront our nation - all of which will determine how we live, how our children live in the future and threaten the very identity and existence of Singaporeans," said SDP chief Chee Soon Juan. "For example, the issue of low productivity - the Prime Minister has said we have maxed out on easy ways on how to grow our economy and yet we know that fear is the one biggest factor that's holding us back from productivity and innovation."

He also took a dig at the 300 guests in the room, most of them academics: “The intelligentsia don’t seem to be encouraging or organising enough of these debates, to propel the kind of knowledge-based society we so desperately need.”

"WE HAVE DONE ALL WE COULD"

Meanwhile, the chairman of the Singapore People's Party Lina Chiam noted that GE2015 was a "different battle fought in a different climate" given that it was the nation's Golden Jubilee.

"This is the year when the PAP took special measures to provide all Singaporeans from cradle to grave with a slew of initiatives and incentives. The passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew also helped to stir emotions," she said.

"We have done all we could. I was one of the Members of Parliament who spoke the most, we did the ground work, but it was not enough ... so I don't know what things I need to do to win Potong Pasir back."

The parties agreed they do have to start working the ground now, to gear up for the next General Election.