

Picking good leaders a growing challenge: ESM Goh

Speaking at the SG50+ conference on Friday (Jul 3), Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong says while the number of democracies around the world is at an all-time high, the trust in politics and politicians is “collapsing” and at “an all-time low”.

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SINGAPORE: Singapore should think ahead to see how it can continue to pick good leaders, as it gets more challenging over time to do so, said Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

Speaking at the SG50+ conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on Friday (Jul 3), Mr Goh pointed out that while the number of democracies around the world is at an all-time high, the trust in politics and politicians is “collapsing” and at “an all-time low”.

He added a good starting point is to debate whether and how the Singapore democratic model can be adapted to the current and future political and social environment. Mr Goh pointed to higher and changing expectations of citizens, as well as the impact of technology and social media as two key features in the future that governments will have to deal with in order to succeed.

Singaporeans' standard of living is at an all-time high. Expectations are also getting higher and changing. This is one key challenge that governments will have to deal with in order to succeed, said Mr Goh.

He said: "In the past, our mountain of expectations was Bukit Timah Hill. We climbed it easily, just 537 feet high. Now it is Mt Everest, not easy to climb. The nearer you are to the peak, the harder it becomes. Not only must you be on top of your game, you also need luck on your side."

"But the Government must hold out hope that everyone who tries can make it to the peak of his expectation. Everyone has his own Mt Everest of expectation and the task of the government is to encourage and help him scale it," he added.

With regard to the internet and social media, Mr Goh said such technologies level the playing field and play a significant role in how information is consumed. He added while leaders can get closer to the people through social media, it adds another layer of complexity to governing.

One such challenge is that the Government's voice is no longer as dominant. During the conference, one participant asked how this can be addressed.

"In times of say, an economic crisis or some other crisis, when the leaders spell out the problems facing the country, I think people will listen," said Mr Goh. "In good times, I think very few people would have time to listen to what they call scare mongering just to win votes and so on. That's a term they used against our leaders when they spelled out the challenges facing Singapore.

"The vision they say is too long-term, what I want is today's problems to be met. The way in Singapore's context, to prevent market failure in the social media market is to continue to retain the trust the people have in us. I think that's very important. We are very fortunate that as of now the people trust the government. Very high level of trust."

Mr Goh added: "As a result of Mr Lee's work, I'd like to say partly because of my work and Prime Minister Lee's work, the trust is very high. If we can maintain that trust, whatever goes on in the social media will not be totally believed by many people because of that trust element."

Mr Goh also mentioned retaining transparency as an important factor: "Put out data, information, statistics, into the public arena so that the people have access to those information. You do not have any skeletons to hide, you don't cover up certain matters and trust and transparency maintained. Social media makes it a bit more challenging for governing, but by and large I think it's just noise outside and I hope those people can distinguish their music from the noise."

One necessary condition, said Mr Goh, is for Singaporeans who can best run the office to step forward, while the rest must be prepared to support them. Secondly, Mr Goh said Singaporeans must vote for the party they believe is the best able to govern.

"Singaporeans must vote for the party that they believe is best able to govern. They should not treat elections like circuses, auctions, beauty contests, or tikam tikam. The answer to whether Singapore can maintain its current virtuous cycle of good governance lies in each and every Singaporean. In our hands, rest the power and responsibility to make a positive difference, some to lead and others to support," said Mr Goh.

He said based on past general elections, Singaporean voters have been astute in their collective vote, choosing when and how to calibrate between showing approval and unhappiness.