

Support for political diversity in Singapore halved, post-GE2015 survey finds

Channel NewsAsia, 4 November 2015

The larger-than-expected margin of victory for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) at the 2015 General Election was a vote in support of keeping the status quo, at the expense of political opposition, a post-GE survey found.

To shed light on the results of the Sep 11 election, which was dominated by the PAP with nearly 70 per cent of the vote, Institute of Policy Studies conducted a study over the phone from Sep 12 to 26, with a random sample of 2,015 Singapore citizens of voting age.

According to the study, released on Wednesday (Nov 4), the percentage of respondents who support greater political pluralism and change in the electoral system had halved from 35.8 per cent in a 2011 survey to 18 per cent this year.

On the other hand, the percentage of "conservatives" in support of the political status quo doubled from 21.6 per cent in 2011 to 44.3 per cent in 2015.

"We are surprised that the number of people we consider to be pluralists has diminished," said lead researcher Gillian Koh. "Those who are still there are supportive of the political ideal of having opposition in Parliament, diverse views and a strong system of checks and balances."

Those who have shifted from being pluralists to conservatives did so because they believed the Government did enough to change policies after 2011, to the point they did not see the need for a stronger opposition voice, Dr Koh said. The PAP won the 2011 GE with 60.1 per cent of the vote.

Key segments in this group that swung to the conservative camp were those aged 21 to 29 as well as 65 and above, she said.

"It is very clear that there were certain policies that were specifically targeted at these segments to address some of their issues," Dr Koh said. "Younger voters may have responded to the policies that the Government implemented to help people feel that Singapore is still a land of opportunities for education and jobs."

She listed ASPIRE and SkillsFuture as some of the policies that have been implemented since 2011.

"Elderly voters probably responded to the fact that the PAP Government after 2011 had introduced a lot of policies to deal with the monetising of housing assets, CPF reforms, Medishield Life, which really deals with the cost of living issues that they are concerned about."

TOP ISSUE: THE COST OF LIVING

Another IPS survey, conducted by Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser before, during and after GE 2015, showed the cost of living to be the most influential issue when it came to voting.

Prof Tan also agreed with Dr Koh, noting that "post-2011, the PAP did a lot to address hot-button issues".

He added that the PAP's "X-factor" in attracting voters was its 50-year track record, in the face of long-term, future "global competition".

"There are trade-offs. We can't have our cake and eat it all the time," said Prof Tan. "In the 1960s and '70s, we had 'Survival Ideology Version 1' and now it's 'Version 2'. That means people are concerned about survival and security once again."

He observed that while events such as SG50 and the passing of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March may have referred to moments in history, they also forced the population to consider the future.

"They're about encouraging people to think back to the past and about what can help them survive and have security again at least for the next 50 years," said Prof Tan.

"THERE IS A ROLE FOR OPPOSITION"

Despite the increase in support for the political status quo, Dr Koh said her survey findings also suggested the conservative camp recognised the need for more pluralism.

From 2006 to 2015, the conservatives increasingly agreed it was important to have elected opposition members, and that there was a need for checks, balances and different views in Parliament.

"There is an overall shift towards a greater appreciation of the need for opposition voices, so clearly our respondents are saying there is a role for political opposition in Singapore today," Dr Koh commented.

"But when it comes to the ballot box, really, it's a question of track record, policies, the qualities of the candidates put forward and whether the overall governance system is balanced and suits their particular view of what is fair and good for Singapore."

Her survey showed that an efficient Government was the top concern of respondents while honesty was the No 1 characteristic desired of candidates.

It also ventured to see if the controversy over the opposition Workers' Party's (WP) handling of Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council funds had any impact on voters.

"Generally, there was no erosion in terms of responses to the credibility of WP," said Dr Koh. "We found that the saga was not one of the top 18 issues listed, but it still mattered to some, like older voters and those who are of humble background."

The Workers' Party's credibility mean score stayed a constant 3.6 from 2006 to 2015, while the PAP's score increased from 3.9 in 2011 to 4.2 in 2015.

PAP scored highest among older folks aged 55 and above, those educated at PSLE level and below, as well as naturalised.

The WP and the Singapore Democratic Party were found to be credible with those aged 39 and below, armed with diplomas and university degrees, while the other opposition parties were more credible with the 21 to 29-year-old age group.