

## What are some key issues in the next General Election?

*Channel NewsAsia*, 23 August 2015

SINGAPORE: The cost of living, town council management, issues of integrity and the impact of an Opposition in Parliament are shaping up to be some of the key issues in the upcoming General Election (GE), according to observers.

What remains to be seen is how the various political parties will factor these into their campaign messages once the hustings start, and what kind of battle strategy they will adopt. Digital media is also set to play its most significant role in any GE yet, but is it a game-changer?

These were some of the issues mentioned a recent episode of Talking Point, which held a “live” discussion on the topic “What will shape the next General Election?”. The panel comprised Assistant Professor of Economics Walter Theseira from Nanyang Technological University (NTU); **Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow of Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)**; Associate Professor of Marketing Ang Swee Hoon from National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School; and Eugene Tan, Associate Professor of Law from Singapore Management University (SMU).

### **BURNING ISSUES FOR VOTERS**

The top worries for Singaporeans are the cost of living, housing affordability and the inflow of foreigners, according to TODAY, in its survey of 2,000 eligible voters conducted in July and August. These were hot-button issues in 2011, and since the General Election in the same year, the Government has effected numerous policy changes. How has this affected voter perception of the problems?

Dr Walter Theseira: If you look at the economic evidence, basically Singaporeans are better off today than they were in 2011. Real incomes have grown, housing prices have moderated, even foreigner growth has been cut to only one quarter of what it was before. But despite this, there is this perception gap; a lot of people on the ground are not feeling this economic reality in their daily lives.

**Dr Gillian Koh: I think it's quite surprising. We are going into an election where the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is negative for all bands of households. So we have a situation where prices are dropping, probably attributed to the high Singapore dollar to keep the cost of living low insofar as these costs are imported. (But) it comes at quite a high price, because it also eats into the competitiveness of what we are able to sell elsewhere. And you have the costs of business going up.**

**My bottom line is, voters must have that conversation about how different policies interact with each other. Then, we will realise that each cost of living issue interacts with the influx of foreigners. You can't fix one and then expect the other to go down.**

### **TOWN COUNCIL MANAGEMENT**

The People's Action Party (PAP) has made the ability to manage a town council a key issue in its campaign. Several of its leaders have emphasised the need for competence, integrity and accountability in candidates. This is in the wake of questions raised by the Auditor

General's Office over the accounts of the Workers' Party-run Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council. (AHPETC). What impact could this issue have?

Dr Koh: It's fundamental to the PAP brand, this idea of integrity, honesty, efficiency. I think they are trying to appeal to how they've built up this base, socialised Singaporeans to appreciate the value of honesty. It's been a running saga - we've had many, many instances where the integrity of the WP team has been called into question. You remember the issue with the hawker centre, on who was really responsible for cleaning. The blame game started, and I think that's how some voters would view it.

But others, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, said that this is a matter of great importance, the question of integrity and honesty. So I think it isn't just an election campaign. It's part and parcel of the legitimacy of the PAP in Singapore.

Prof Theseira: Voters have experienced that sometimes, the Government does treat opposition-held areas unequally, compared to PAP-held areas. Some may have the perception that this is all about party politics and there are no real national issues of integrity at stake here. So I think it's going to be a bit of a hard-sell for the PAP to convince the public this is really about the integrity and transparency, and not about party politicking.

Talking Point host Steven Chia also directed the panel's attention to TODAY survey's findings that most people view the role of an MP as being mainly to solve problems and concerns raised by constituents (50 per cent), and less so to contribute to Parliamentary debates. What are the implications?

Dr Koh: If (residents) expect efficiency, they have to question whether their town council is competent in managing the finances, not just for the few days or years, but also for the long haul. There must be money put aside in sinking funds so that you know the estate can be kept in good shape for many years to come.

## **PARTIES' STRATEGIES**

Dr Theseira: For the PAP, in some ways it goes back to basics. This is about selling the PAP as a party with credibility and integrity, the party which has the most trustworthy people to lead the country forward.

Associate Professor Eugene Tan: The Workers' Party would have some difficulty trying to impress upon voters their competence of municipal issues. But they will try to emphasise the value proposition of why, as Singapore moves forward, it is important to have a strong Opposition presence in Parliament, not through Non-constituency MPs but through elected MPs.

Associate Professor Ang Swee Hoon: For the Workers' Party, fielding 28 candidates is to assure the voters that if you want the PAP to still have the majority in Parliament, they will be. But we are there for checks and balances. To me I think that's an effective strategy.

Dr Theseira: For the other Opposition parties, to be quite honest, I think it's about trying to find an issue which will resonate with the public for some reason, and then riding the issue. I think they have a pretty hard time differentiating themselves.

Assoc Prof Ang: The smaller parties should consolidate. They lack leadership and don't have the resources or time to do a good job and fight whoever they're against. It doesn't matter if they have differences in views, so long as they find a commonality.

Dr Theseira: I think it's obvious why they don't consolidate. The fundamental reason is that too many of them are led by or have people in the structure who have ego problems or ego issues, and so they would not willingly subject themselves to rule by consensus or rule by one person.

## **DIGITAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON ELECTION**

Assoc Prof Tan: I don't think that digital media will have a game-changing effect because it tends to attract people who share similar views. So the big challenge is, can you draw people who would otherwise not go to your site, persuade them to stay on and read enough?

Dr Theseira: I think the main impact of social media is in two areas: One is making campaigning a 24/7 affair. The other has got to do with the fact that seemingly minor issues can become really huge. Just the way the candidate talks to a person, if he shies away - that sort of little clip when it's posted without context, it becomes this guy who's "out of touch". And suddenly everybody has this image of this candidate that could be far removed from reality. Even five years ago it wasn't a big deal, but today, people are filming you and waiting for you to make a mistake.

Assoc Prof Ang: To me, voters have to judge very carefully because some of these comments can be planted.

Dr Koh: The key thing is, we talk about First World Parliament, First World politics. We need first class voters. And gradually we'll move towards that, in this new media age. What we need are people who have a mixed diet, and are not just reading one media source. (Also) in the last GE we saw a lot of bloggers (who) enjoy entertaining us; hopefully this time we see more public intellectuals as well, thoughtful bloggers. They need to use this occasion to ask good questions and get us thinking about the serious issues.