

**Report on Singapore Perspectives 2020: Politics**  
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SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES 2020, the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) flagship annual conference was held on 20 January 2020. Titled "Politics", the conference engaged attendees in a socio-historical dialogue about Singapore's politics — past, present and future. Among the attendees were policymakers, members of the opposition parties, members of the civil society, academics and students. The conference featured presentations by experts and activists and saw robust discussions on paths taken by political parties; impacts of geopolitical events on Singapore; and the contributions of civil society and non-state actors to politics. It featured presentations by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Mr Heng Swee Keat, two panels of distinguished speakers and a dialogue session with Minister for Trade and Industry Mr Chan Chun Sing.



*DPM Heng Swee Keat (left) with students from Temasek Polytechnic at the conference.*

## Opening Keynote

Chairperson
<p><b>Mr Janadas Devan</b> Director Institute of Policy Studies</p>
Speaker
<p><b>Mr Heng Swee Keat</b> Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance</p>

DPM Heng Swee Keat asserted his concerns over deepening fault lines that impact society's ability to find and forge a common path. The role of politics in all this, he stated, could be encapsulated in three words — “differences”, “we” and “together”.

### Differences

It is essential to focus on who Singaporeans are, as Singapore gets more diverse in terms of needs, views and ideas, said DPM Heng. Trustworthy and robust leadership is needed to pave the way to do what is right for the people and resist populism. Ultimately, Singaporeans need to work collectively with a shared vision.

### Together

Global developments have affected countries at different rates. Growing wealth and income inequality, as well as disruptions to labour markets, have been observed primarily in societies with an ageing population. As a result, a sense of pessimism is created and worsened by echo chambers on social media. These developments have caused a lack of trust in public institutions. DPM Heng noted the loss of bipartisan in the US and the Hong Kong protests. Singapore is not immune to these pressures and disruptions as it is easy to exploit existing distrust and anger.

### We

Singapore is an anomaly as it is a young sovereign nation that went through self-determination. Exceptional governance, working together with a united people have and will continue to enable our success, noted DPM Heng. The creation of shared experiences by way of education and housing will eventually create a virtuous cycle to facilitate progress for Singapore. Moving forward, Singapore needs to ensure that young Singaporeans maintain a sense of hope and that no Singaporean is left behind. This is why the government has increased expenditure on pre-school education and upskilling to equip Singaporeans with necessary and updated skillsets.

Singapore cannot close itself from the world; it must stay open. Singapore faces global pressures such as the US-China strategic competition, a rapidly ageing society, climate change and technological disruption. Yet, a growing Southeast Asia also means that Singapore can become an Asian global node and a friend to all by turning diversity into strength.



*DPM Heng Swee Keat delivering the keynote speech.*

### **Question-and-Answer Session**

Responding to a question on potential challenges for Singapore in 2020, DPM Heng highlighted the existence of external pressures. First, the rising geopolitical uncertainties and declining support for free trade and globalisation will be a significant hurdle. As economies in developing countries catch up, there are lower economic inequalities. Structural changes must take place, and Singapore must prepare its workers for the disruptions. He added that there would be political conflicts as international cooperation become increasingly complicated in light of demographic change, emerging skill-based economies and insufficient investments in research in new industries. He noted that Singapore benefits from the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's (ASEAN) emphasis on economic cooperation.

Responding to another question on the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), DPM Heng reiterated that POFMA is “not about stopping people from talking about their views.” Singapore must ensure that all statements of facts are accurate. In doing so, it will prevent exploitation and fabrication of facts for political gain. Citing the rampant misinformation leading to Brexit, he added that POFMA ensures that Singaporeans have access to accurate information which will affect the decision-making of the country. POFMA thus protects the public interest of Singaporeans.

## Panel I: Paths Taken

Chairperson		
<b>Professor Tan Tai Yong</b> President Yale-NUS College		
Speakers		
<b>Dr Lam Peng Er</b> Senior Research Fellow East Asian Institute National University of Singapore	<b>Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim</b> Deputy Executive Editor South China Morning Post	<b>Mr Bilahari Kausikan</b> Chairman Middle East Institute National University of Singapore

Panel 1 discussed Singapore's political landscape that has gone through several developments since independence.

Dr Lam Peng Er briefly listed Singapore's post-independent political scene, especially the role played by the pioneer generation of leaders, "Lee's Lieutenants". He noted that Lee's generation were revolutionaries while the 2G, 3G and 4G were technocrats keeping the flag flying. Dr Lam observed that the PAP seems to have defied the notion of a gradually withering dominant party. It is an incumbent party maintaining its relative autonomy from lobby groups and special interests. At the same time, the party enjoys symbiotic ties with state machinery, labour movement, media and grassroots. He added that the PAP needs to evolve and adapt from a "politics of survival" to "politics of aspirations" given the more diverse, educated and cosmopolitan electorate. He noted the increase in social welfare policies over the years, which reflected the changing political landscape.

Concluding his speech, Dr Lam posed several questions to the audience for them to reflect upon: Can the PAP resolve PMET concerns, address inequality and attract millennial support and talent? Will a post-Lee Hsien Loong PAP remain united? Is there space for a Team B in the PAP? Can citizens have greater access to information and statistics? What if a future PAP A team fails?



*Dr Lam Peng Er concluding his speech by inviting participants to reflect on the concerns faced by Singaporeans and how these factors may influence the political landscape of Singapore.*

Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim shared three main observations about the opposition in Singapore politics. First, the opposition is not a government in waiting. Instead, it functions to reflect Singaporeans' desire to express some oversight over the ruling party. Second, there will be no grand opposition alliance. Opposition disunity reflects voters' differing views on how the opposition parties should behave. The Workers' Party has been the most successful opposition party in the last 25 years. However, some opposition voters dislike its style, preferring a more confrontational opposition, she said. Third, the opposition will continue to play the underdog role prominently. Attacks on the opposition by the ruling party may incur backlash. However, as opposition parties become increasingly prominent, voters will also expect more from them.

Ms Zuraidah then moved on to three main game-changers in the upcoming elections. First, she discussed the topic of who rules the online space. Internet tools are at the disposal of all parties, including the government. Given the expense of such technology, governments have the advantage. In future elections, the online space may add to, rather than subtract from the PAP's chances. The second game-changer is the Tan Cheng Bock factor and whether he will inspire others to join him in defecting from PAP. But, younger voters may be unfamiliar with him, and he is vulnerable to attacks from the PAP. The final game-changer is global uncertainty. Voters may swing to vote for the PAP in times of instability.

Mr Bilahari Kausikan began his speech by talking about the PAP's struggle against the Communist United Front, characterising our pioneer leaders as practitioners and realists. They understood that crude realism was not realistic, and there was some agency. The

fundamental incompatibility between a “Malaysian Malaysia” and “Malay Malaysia” still underpins our bilateral ties with Malaysia today, and with Indonesia to some extent.

Mr Bilahari stated that the value proposition of meritocracy would continuously be challenged by powerful external forces and by influences asserted globally. He concluded that leaders today need to have political skills and technocratic competence.

### Question-and-Answer Session



*Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim answering a question from the audience.*

Questions were posed regarding future challenges that Singapore would face and the adequacy of the current governance system. Dr Lam remarked that younger people view the government's reforms as being too timid. Mr Bilahari noted that it is rare for governments to make long-term plans in which its benefits are not immediate or apparent.

There were also questions from the audience about the potential entry of Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Kuan Yew's grandsons to politics, which Dr Lam characterised as speculations for now. Finally, the current situation in Hong Kong was also discussed, with Ms Zuraidah noting that if Hong Kong-style protests happen here, it is not a cause, but a reflection of Singapore's failure.

## Panel II: New Forms and Movements

Chairperson	
<b>Associate Professor Farish Ahmad-Noor</b> Coordinator of PhD Programme S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies	
Speakers	
<b>Dr Crystal Abidin</b> Senior Research Fellow Internet Studies Faculty of Humanities Curtin University	<b>Mr Cai Yinzhou</b> Director Citizen Adventures
<b>Ms Carrie Tan</b> Executive Director Daughters of Tomorrow	<b>Ms Nor Lastrina Hamid</b> Co-founder Singapore Youth for Climate Action

The panel presented their causes and spoke about their roles as activists who impact social shifts in a democratic society.

Dr Crystal Abidin opened the session by explaining the role of internet culture in everyday politics in Singapore. Citizens experience a state of anomie, a condition in which people feel invisible in a crowd, but also feel monitored by security cameras or other people. This condition could be due to the high knowledge of technology and the high online participation rate among citizens.

She revealed the impact of internet culture on Singapore society by laying out three key features that emerged from it — influencer culture, meme factories, and vigilante activism.

She stated that addressing social injustice through parodies is a large part of influencer culture as it enables influencers like MunahHirziOfficial and Preetipls to share complex messages, such as anti-racism, to their audience through palatable formats. She added that while there are influencers who use their platforms to better society, there are influencers who produce parodies that normalise the caricaturing and mocking of minorities.

Meme factories contribute to the normalisation of ideas as young people are equipped with the vocabulary to discuss issues deemed contentious. Citing the #WhereIsBaey? meme, where a photo of MP Baey Yam Keng was edited into various locations by netizens, Dr Crystal Abidin illustrated how public feedback was garnered in a light-hearted manner. She warned the audience to be critical of memes as they can include misinformation or be misused by parties with malignant agendas.

She added that the internet allows for increased netizen participation. Community engagement platforms like SMRT Feedback Ltd let netizens report injustices they have witnessed or experienced. It also enables netizens to rally support and implement community

actions. However, the culture of vigilantism can create mob mentalities and call-out fatigue among netizens.

Mr Cai Yinzhou talked about his efforts to learn about the neighbourhoods in Singapore, namely Geylang and Dakota Crescent. He traced historical pathways that led to Geylang's reputation of being a place of vice. The imposition of taxes on vices such as opium in 1819, the legalisation of sex work in 1860, and the Land Acquisition Act in 1967 that caused the resettlement of these activities to the city fringes and beyond, led to Geylang being the designated location for the “containment and control” strategy.

He added that living in Geylang allowed him to befriend migrant workers. While offering free haircuts as part of the "Back Alley Barbers" initiative, he learnt of their sacrifices working in Singapore. He saw Geylang as a social ecosystem and encouraged people to interact with migrant workers.

A social ecosystem was formed in Dakota Crescent using a similar approach. Partnering with residents, he organised walking tours called “Dakota Tours” to show to Singaporean visitors the connection that residents have within the Dakota Crescent community before its demolition. Mr Cai also documented the merits of the place from the people’s perspective on a platform called [Betweentwohomes.sg](http://Betweentwohomes.sg) and helped to piece together a conservation report, which led to partial conservation of the blocks. In 2017, residents faced relocation challenges such as losing connection with old neighbours, adapting to the design and layout of their new estates, which was mitigated with the help of volunteers.

Mr Cai's experience from the Geylang and Dakota Crescent adventures led him to form Citizen Adventures, an initiative that encourages social mixings, fosters love among neighbours, and forms new norms that resist systemic labels placed on the renting population. He also noted that the roles of clans and religious institutions as mutual self-help groups could offer community and assistance to migrant workers while they work in Singapore.

The third speaker, Ms Carrie Tan, Executive Director of Daughters of Tomorrow (DOT), outlined the work carried out by the organisation to support mothers towards gainful employment and a better future. Highlighting the romanticised dominant perception that women belonging in the ethnic minorities, single mothers and migrant mothers are vulnerable yet resilient in the face of adversity, she explained that at least 27% of low-income mothers suffer from some type of mental wellness issues. She explained that the state of poverty could deplete non-financial resources and opportunities. Insufficient money for transportation and phone bills can limit one's social capital, and the lack of childcare support hinder single mothers from job-hunting.

Mothers can benefit from the DOT job-matching programme that consists of befriender support to increase their confidence, employer sensitisation skills to create a friendlier workplace environment, and skills workshops that are supported with child-minding services so mothers can learn in peace.

DOT advocates for parent-friendly employment practices by encouraging employers to be more sensitive to the challenges faced by them. Parent-friendly employment practices include childcare subsidies for working mothers and “core and stable scheduling” for mothers who work in the retail and service industry. Core and stable scheduling allows mothers to



work during fixed office hours in non-office jobs, thus making their working hours conducive to parenting. Ms Tan announced that as of December 2019, 96 companies across all sectors have pledged to implement “core and stable scheduling”.

In policymaking, DOT has advocated for the removal of the debarment period, which prevented divorced parents from renting HDB flats and owning subsidised units. Housing instabilities were found to contribute to women's stress and hindered their participation in the workplace. Another advocacy win for DOT was the extension of childcare subsidies beyond working parents, to include women who are looking for employment. Ms Tan said that from 2014 to 2017, DOT worked to affect this policy change by highlighting the issue to stakeholders and explaining to them challenges faced by these mothers when job-hunting without childcare support.

Lastly, she encouraged policymakers to consider providing not just financial aid, but also to invest in the low-income community to help them to unlock their full potential.

Ms Nor Lastrina Hamid, co-founder of Singapore Youth for Climate Action (SYCA), talked about her work in the climate sector in Singapore. She laid out her observations on the evolution of the climate movement in Singapore. In 2010, the climate movement 350.org from the United States of America (USA) spread to Singapore. From 2010 to 2015, the climate movement focused on raising awareness by organising activities like beach clean-ups, documentary screening, and youth workshops to drill in the sustainability mindset. Ms Lastrina spoke of how SYCA was founded in 2015 to focus on capacity-building among youths who wanted to do more beyond local climate action. SYCA's flagship programme consists of workshops that equip people for the United Nations Climate Conference attended by students and staff from the National University of Singapore. She remarked that the climate movement between the year 2016 to 2018 expanded and noticed a growing interest in climate policies and international negotiations among youths in Singapore.

She spoke of how ground-up groups could affect political change. For instance, SG Climate Rally 2019 was the defining moment in the climate movement, as it was a physical expression of concern about the climate issue, namely by youths. Currently, SG Climate Rally and Speak for Climate are garnering deeper commitments to climate policy during the upcoming General Elections by speaking with political parties on possible collaborations. She announced campaign Greenwatch where SG Climate Rally and Speak for Climate will be releasing a climate scorecard assessing all party manifestos in tackling the climate crisis.

Ms Lastrina then explained how social media is amplifying the climate movement in Singapore. Social media platforms like Facebook are useful tools to exchange information and generate conversations on climate-related content. Other platforms that are trending among consumers and content creators are Instagram and podcasts. Given the efficacy of social media in raising awareness of the climate crisis, she believes that everyone in Singapore would be aware of the issue. However, while some may be aware of the problem, she noted that they might remain apathetic. The key is to reduce the gap between sympathetic and being apathetic to the climate crisis.

She concluded by acknowledging that there would always be critics who speak against climate change policies. However, she highlighted that they might speak from a place of concern and thus need to be heard and understood, no matter how credible one might perceive the policies. She suggested that by doing this, it keeps dialogues open, which may

reduce apathy.



*Ms Nor Lastrina Hamid acknowledged that there would always be critics who speak against climate change policies but who needs to be fairly heard and understood as they might speak from a place of concern.*

### **Question-and-Answer Session**

On the question of whether the government is doing enough to hear from youths and what can be done to bridge the gap, Dr Crystal Abidin pointed out that there are young people in the government who are stakeholders in the society. There are also various ways for the government to tap the organic networks of passionate youths. Ms Lastrina encouraged young people who are vocal about specific issues to break the communication barriers. Youths can go to the Singapore government directory website, learn about ministries and departments and contact the relevant authorities.

Responding to a question on what advice the panellists can give to youths who want to champion a cause, Mr Cai said the first step was for youths to identify issues that interest them. Then, he encouraged young people to “interact with relevant stakeholders on the ground, so they can think out of the box”. Additionally, teachers can support their efforts by educating them. Crystal's advice would be to build allies with other advocates, to “review what our forefathers have done” and to have the stamina for efforts to be sustainable.



From left: Mr Cai Yinzhou, Dr Crystal Abidin, A/P Farish Noor, Ms Carrie Tan, Ms Nor Lastrina Hamid answering questions from the audience

**Dialogue with Mr Chan Chun Sing**

Chairperson
<p><b>Ms Lee Huay Leng</b>            Head            Chinese Media Group            Singapore Press Holdings</p>
Speaker
<p><b>Mr Chan Chun Sing</b>            Minister for Trade and Industry</p>

In his opening remarks, Mr Chan launched his discussion of Singaporean politics by exploring how political culture in Singapore could continue to retain its effectiveness in meeting the needs of the populace, even in the face of polarising global processes that have, in other societies, contributed to the rise of sectarian strife and political deadlock.

Citing an international rise in partisanship and opportunism in politics on both the extreme right and left of the spectrum, he cautioned that Singaporean politics is at risk of becoming similarly influenced due to the nation's openness and relative lack of insulating geographical, historical and cultural buffers.

Mr Chan outlined three strategies to mitigate such threats and consolidate Singapore's exceptionalism on the global stage. First, to translate pluralistic politics effectively into constructive action. Second, to ensure that political systems evolve with the times, and, finally, to attract the right talent for sound leadership at all levels of society.

### **Question-and-Answer Session**

During the dialogue that ensued, Mr Chan fielded several queries on how Singapore's political system might evolve in the future, with specific regards to, for instance, the People's Association (PA), Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) as well as the review of electoral boundaries. He also responded to queries posed by opposition party members, Singapore Democratic Party chairman Professor Paul Tambyah and People's Power Party secretary-general Mr Goh Meng Seng, on Operation Coldstore and access to data, respectively.



*Ms Lee Huay Leng (right), head of the Chinese Media Group at Singapore Press Holdings Ltd, moderating the dialogue session with Mr Chan Chun Sing (left).*

Other key concerns that surfaced throughout the course of the exchange are issues ranging from climate change, language and identity politics. Clarifying his vision for Singapore's overall progress, Mr Chan emphasised the importance of continually revisiting these and other matters of economic, geopolitical and sociocultural import as he argued that no strategy could promise to prove useful for posterity.

In particular, he urged regular, in-depth engagement with Singapore's citizenry as a promising means to move forward, albeit with the qualification that translating discussion into concrete action was crucial before such engagement could ultimately prove valuable.

"In today's world, a lot of people focus on the first part — how to generate diversity, how to generate debate. Those are all very good things. But, the question is, beyond that, how do we generate convergence?"

Reiterating the crucial task of ensuring that any strategy embarked on would take into account the welfare of future generations, Mr Chan concluded his dialogue by expressing his optimism that, as long as Singaporeans today could work collectively towards "leav[ing] behind something better for the next generation", "even beyond SG 100 ... [Singapore] will continue to shine."

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Clarrence Leo Shi Yu who is an intern at IPS also contributed to this report.

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