

IPS Forum, 7 June 2011: “What Youth Want”

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IPS held a forum titled ‘What Youth Want’ on 7 June 2011 where representatives of six out of the seven political parties that contested in the May 2011 General Election shared their views on how Singaporeans born in and after 1975 (a group that constituted about 26% of the total electorate) might have impacted the election, and would continue to shape politics in Singapore.

IPS Senior Research Fellow, Dr Gillian Koh, moderated the forum.

Opening Remarks

In introducing the topic, she suggested several theories to guide an analysis of how such a demographic trend might matter. The modernisation thesis would suggest that as each of these younger cohorts of Singaporeans were better educated and grew up in relative affluence, they were more likely to have liberal political attitudes and focus their political activism on ‘quality of life’ issues. There was also the uniquely Singaporean thesis that with greater distance from the founding years of Independent Singapore, the younger generation’s affinity with the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) would weaken. Finally, there was also the idea that technology -- namely the Information Technology Revolution and the emergence of social media -- would provide not only new channels for political expression and mobilisation, but result in

different forms of political identities. She invited the speakers and participants to share their views on how Singaporean post-75ers might shape the political landscape going forward.

Mr Desmond Lee, People’s Action Party



Mr Desmond Lee a recently-elected Member of Parliament for Jurong Group Representation Constituency (GRC) from the People’s Action Party (PAP) felt it was important to connect with younger voters emotionally while still paying attention to the needs of older citizens.

To a large extent, he argued, the concerns of the young such as comfortable homes and good jobs were no different from those of the older generation, but they were more concerned that citizens were treated ‘fairly, justly and compassionately’. The key differences between the pre- and post-75ers were that the latter grew up in a stable and secure Singapore, were beneficiaries of the education system with more having been through tertiary

education, and were more conscious of higher order ideals and willing to challenge the orthodoxy in national issues. Rather than having a strong affiliation to a particular party, they were discerning in reviewing political parties and their candidates on their merit. He said that Singaporeans were paradoxically, 'pro-PAP, pro-opposition, and pro-Singapore' all at the same time, as they appreciated the strong foundation that the PAP had laid in terms of governance and economic development but recognised the place for political opposition with the need to guard against populist politics.

Mr Lee felt that the decrease in popular support for the PAP at the polls had little to do with the large increase of post-75 voters. Instead, housing and transport policy issues and the better candidates fielded by the opposition contributed a large part to it. He believed the PAP would rejuvenate itself and the government would listen better going forward.

Ms Nicole Seah, National Solidarity Party



National Solidarity Party candidate for Marine Parade GRC, Ms Nicole Seah said that she would share her own story to demonstrate what Singaporean youth were like. She revealed that there was a tradition in her family of voting for the political opposition because like many others, the assumption was that 'the

incumbent would always take care of us'—that the PAP would always be voted into government and would provide for citizens' best interest and the vote for the opposition would be a check on it. She realised that this sort of passivity was not the right attitude to take. She was prompted to join a political party as she felt it was important for Singaporeans to take ownership and invest the time and effort towards ensuring the progress of their nation.

The recent election seemed to have polarised the country with people resorting to extreme arguments and personal attacks on candidates perhaps because the country, she said, was unused to truly democratic discourse. There were those who thought it was a social media election but Ms Seah said that this assessment gave social media too much credit. However, social media did succeed in amplifying the 'human truths' that Singaporeans were seeking. They were craving first for avenues to exchange their opinions and ideas; second, a community that shared their beliefs; and third, the opportunity to be heard, Ms Seah said. This, she added, was reminiscent of the *kampong* spirit in Singapore before industrialisation began.

Ms Seah also highlighted the need to help young citizens feel a sense of rootedness and loyalty to Singapore and related the issue to an IPS study where one in two young Singaporeans did not seem to feel rooted to the country. That might be achieved with a better balance between the focus on economic growth and social development. In that regard, she felt it would be important to take the opinions of the younger people into consideration and develop Singapore into a truly world class society, rather than just a world class

economy; ask them 'what more can one do to ensure that no one is left behind?'

Mr Jeffrey Lim, Singapore Democratic Alliance



Mr Jeffrey Lim from the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), who was the party's candidate in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, said that it was important to acknowledge the concerns of Singaporeans who were in various stages of life (and not just those of the post-75ers). While the key performance indicator the government set for itself was 'economic growth', this growth did not seem to translate into salaries or benefit citizens by the same measure as growth. He said it was important to look beyond the superficial and the statistics. He cited an example of a blog article he read about a man who ate six meals a day, and then nothing the next, averaging 'three meals a day'. Clearly this was an unhealthy way to live. In this way, it may not be entirely helpful to speak of averages and think they represent the actual situation well, he said. In this regard, public policy was often directed at the 'average citizen', or 'average salaries' but this approach might not provide a good measure of what was happening on the ground. Likewise, it was not the 'resident unemployment rate' that one should be concerned with but unemployment figures for citizens, he added.

He said that Singaporean youth have a large potential and capacity for change and to capitalise on this, it would be important to teach them critical thinking to properly examine such issues.

Ms Michelle Lee, Singapore Democratic Party

The fourth speaker was Ms Michelle Lee who was candidate in the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC for the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). She explained how Generation X and Y (Gen X and Y) had different experiences and therefore different world-views. Gen X had come of age in the 1980s and 1990s in a bullish environment and yet witnessed the failure of institutions in two global recessions. They realised that 'money isn't everything'. On the other hand, Gen Y had come of age in the new millennium in a bear market, and witnessed problems and catastrophes like terrorism, tsunamis and earthquakes. Thus, they were naturally sceptical about institutions, trusted their own social networks and valued higher order needs such as the opportunity to participate, Ms Lee said.



As such, Gen Y youth did not show an automatic deference to power or to the rich. While this would seem disrespectful to older generations, this paradigm shift in mindset had brought Singapore society to a critical juncture, said Ms Lee. It was necessary for policymakers to do some serious soul-searching to get Singapore's

social policies right as the country had potential to become the 'cultural and social capital of Asia'.

Mr Jimmy Lee, Singapore People's Party



Mr Jimmy Lee from the Singapore's People's Party (SPP) and a candidate in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, said he wanted to address the segment of young people who would be first time voters in the next election, presumably 2016. Drawing from various experiences, Mr Lee observed that Singaporean youth today were an independent and innovative group, and not 'mindless rebels', and acknowledged the contribution of Singapore's education system to this. They were not afraid to think up new ideas. On the other hand, there was another segment among them who were disillusioned and disenfranchised. They worried about having to compete against foreigners and perhaps having to end up like their working class parents. It was important therefore to reach out especially to this second group, to give them hope and inspiration.

Mr Lee also commented on the older generation's view of youth as demanding and unrealistic in their expectations. Disagreeing, he argued that the problem was rather, that Singapore youth lacked the resources and guidance on how to achieve their dreams. He urged policymakers to look beyond analysing the

youth as a statistic, and instead recognise the individuality and potential within this demographic group.

Mr Yaw Shin Leong, Workers' Party

The last speaker was Mr Yaw Shin Leong, the recently elected Member of Parliament for Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) representing the Workers' Party (WP). He suggested that there was a sense of restlessness amongst Singaporean youth as they searched for their place in society. They wanted happiness in all aspects of their lives; as a group, youth want to be happy, he said.

Youth also want to be respected. Using auditing firm KPMG's recent launch of its 'office playground' in Shenton Way as an example, Mr Yaw said that for this demographic, it was possible to be professional and enjoy oneself at the same time at the workplace. They would like to be accorded the level of trust, like in the situation of being allowed to access social media at the workplace.



Clearly, youth want to be heard, as seen from the gamut of voices in social media, Mr Yaw added. Smart phones allowed youth to be constantly connected to various social platforms, sharing their thoughts on the go. Yet their ability to self-regulate was evident in how they had educated Internet 'trolls' on proper online decorum. They had a different set of needs, all directed towards self-

actualisation and wished to make a positive difference in society.

Question and Answer Session

On Rootedness

Forum moderator Dr Gillian Koh began the discussion section of the Forum by asking speakers to offer one key suggestion on how to make young Singaporeans feel invested in and rooted to the country. Ms Michelle Lee said that the younger people had been given to understand that nation-building was the task of a select elite; something they had little role in. She said there were no simple solutions, and changes in the *status quo* would be needed. Singaporean youth were looking for sincere and meaningful changes to the process of political engagement and that it was not entirely up to the opposition parties to address this.

Mr Desmond Lee speaking as a member of the ruling party said he too understood this from his profession and political experience. Citing examples, he recognised that the youth today wanted substantive and sincere interaction with policymakers early in the policy-making process, not just before proposals were presented in parliament. 'Touch-and-go politics' would be a thing of the past. Ms Seah said it was only human nature that if one could not speak up or contribute to the system, it was not possible to feel like a stakeholder in it. She too felt that greater critical thinking should permeate society and be fostered through the education system. Censorship should be relaxed to allow for greater independence of thought and to encourage greater discourse in society.

Mr Jimmy Lee agreed that it was important to lift restrictions and signal that political discourse was encouraged. He said that

the younger generation was already 'talking ahead' through their Facebook pages and blogs for instance, but there was a difference between the Internet world and the real world. They would need to be encouraged to 'step out' and extend their discourse into the latter to develop that tangible sense of ownership and rootedness.

Social Agenda

A participant said that too much was focused on the economic agenda rather than the social agenda in Singapore, echoing a point raised by the speakers. He asked how it would be possible to make Singapore's social agenda matter more. Speakers agreed that while social goals were less tangible they were no less important. Mr Jeffrey Lim and Ms Lee recalled efforts to quantify the value of these goals— Bhutan's index of Gross National Happiness and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Better Life Index were examples they raised.

Mr Desmond Lee said that in the past, the government had adopted an economics-first approach to ensure that it had the resources to tackle important social goals. Apart from the existing partnership between the government and the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), he said that there was clearly a real need for social service agencies, and academics to speak louder about these needs to feed them into the consciousness of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and NCSS. He also cited the good work of family service centres like the Lakeside FSC that were doing the hard work on the ground.

Mr Yaw said that there were social needs today that had not been addressed yet. People seemed lost about how to access

help. What was most critical, he said, was to provide emotional support to people in need. He said he was impressed by how spontaneous and easy it had been to use social media to mobilise untapped energies of individuals, including youth, in the community to help. Such was the genesis of Hougang Women's Support Network.

Ms Seah spoke of the need to professionalise and recognise the good work of the social services sector and the potential of social enterprise. She said it was relatively easy to organise simple initiatives to make a difference in the community. This would redress the sense that society had forgotten the 'feel good' effect of doing good.

Mr Desmond Lee's Personal Vision

A member of the audience invited Mr Desmond Lee to reveal his personal vision for Singapore or his political activism, and asked if he would be willing to make a stand if these clashed with his party's vision. Mr Lee said that he would raise issues on which he might disagree with, with his party and the government and said it was important for politicians to speak their mind. He said that he disagreed with the decision to proceed with the Integrated Resorts (although Mr Lee was not a member of parliament at the time of the decision). When asked if he could comment with a more recent example, Mr Lee said that he had suggested that more could be done to address a key concern of young Singaporeans who wished to start families which was to purchase of flats close to the residence of their parents. He said that he had made his views on this known to the relevant government authorities.

Singapore, a Welfare State?

The same participant asked if Singapore was in denial about being a welfare state. After all, Singaporeans received substantial subsidies in education, healthcare and housing. Mr Desmond Lee explained that the government's approach was to design assistance for the less fortunate in a way that would not compromise their work ethic. The classic welfare state, on the other hand, subsidised unemployed individuals with the view that subsistence provisions were necessary until the unemployed found work. Mr Yaw said that it was challenging for the state to define those it should help. Current instruments catered to the basic needs of the poor, say up to the 25th percentile. The state had to adopt a balanced approach to avoid running into fiscal difficulties further down the road. Ms Michelle Lee said that the incumbent's position implied that those who were not faring well did not work hard, which was not the case. She believed that they did work very hard but had little to show for it. The way forward, she felt, was to further develop the social welfare mechanisms in place already, and adopt a minimum wage policy that many competitive countries already had.

Political Communication

Another participant asked if it was fair of the PAP to expect opposition parties to present 'policy alternatives' to be considered credible, and whether on the other hand, opposition parties were also simply being populist in the recent elections. Ms Seah said that she did not oppose the PAP's policies for the sake of opposing them, but sought to redress problem areas that had been overlooked by the government. She added that communication at rallies was often about simplifying a message to reach a large

audience and trying one's best to echo ground sentiments to create resonance.

Mr Jimmy Lee said that there was a need to examine if there was a deeper message beyond statements that appeared to ride on the wave of populist sentiments. Such rallying calls gave the man-in-the-street (who might be limited in his ability to articulate comments sophisticatedly) a means of expressing himself. For one, mentions of the escape of terrorist Mas Selamat personified the need for greater accountability. Policymakers should be prepared to listen to ideas from the public but not expect complex discussions of policy trade-offs and workable solutions instantly, he said. He also proposed a re-examination of the system of grassroots organisations and leaders so that it could become a system that was more responsive to the ground.

Adding to this, Mr Yaw spoke of how it was encouraging for him to witness the continuing service of alternative grassroots leaders in the WP constituency who did not receive the same benefits as those affiliated to the People's Association.

Social Media and the Election

One participant asked if the opposition saw the moderation of political views on the Internet as their responsibility, and whether they had ever attempted to moderate online discussions. Mr Yaw said that the general election was over and it was time for all, regardless of party affiliation, to work together for the common good of Singapore. He said he would explain policy decision-making processes to members of the public if the situation required it, and also encouraged other members of the opposition fraternity to do so.

Mr Jimmy Lee said that the governing party appeared to recognise that the management of Internet discourse was quite a different endeavour from regulating the mainstream media. Managing the online space was not about regulation (or the filing of defamation suits) but the provision of leadership by articulating one's position, and allowing responses from both sides of the fence to be published and challenged.

Youth and Success

The final set of questions had to do with class, education and the notion of success which would impact the lives of Singapore youth today. Were there voiceless, disenfranchised young people struggling to make ends meet? Would good grades, entry into top schools and material acquisition continue to be key determinants or markers of success? The education system has also appeared to have cultivated a racial or cultural elite (as a result of the Special Assistance Plan school system). Could such a group effectively lead in the future, given the decreasing interaction between elites and marginal groups such as youth gangs? Could the current education system prepare today's youth for tomorrow's challenges? What was the role of a liberal arts education in this endeavour?

Citing what she thought was a mere 25% of the population that were University and Polytechnic graduates (General Household Survey 2005), Ms Michelle Lee said that more could be done to make younger Singaporeans globally competitive by providing opportunities for tertiary education.

Ms Nicole Seah said that the current education system had served the country relatively well, but more could be done to cater to the diversity of types of intelligence. Beyond the elite mentality, leadership selection should factor in those with a strong work ethic and those who excelled in their areas of pursuit.

Mr Desmond Lee said that in his time, good grades were the passport to a bright future. However, the government had adopted the education framework of cultivating 'peaks of excellence' since then,

with institutions like the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), the School of the Arts, and more recently with the Yale-National University of Singapore liberal arts college to allow for many different fields of endeavour and forms of excellence to be recognised.

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