

3 constants for opposition are no coalition, serve as check on PAP & underdog advantage: SCMP's Zuraidah Ibrahim **The Opposition parties will likely not form a coalition.**

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Besides the polling day date and the announcement of the electoral boundaries report, there are still many unknowns in the impending general election.

However, Zuraidah Ibrahim, Deputy Executive Editor of the South China Morning Post (SCMP), said that there were three things that she was certain of when it came to the opposition parties in Singapore, namely:

- There would be no grand coalition between Opposition parties.
- The Opposition will enjoy the underdog advantage.
- Voters want the Opposition to serve as a check on the government, not replace them.

Zuraidah was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives Conference on Jan. 20, 2020.

The panel she was on included Bilahari Kausikan, a retired diplomat and the Chairman of the Middle East Institute, and Lam Peng Er, Senior Research Fellow with the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore.

Peering through fog

Zuraidah said of the current situation:

“Alas, as things stand, we are still trying to peer into a fog. We don't have a date yet, we don't have the shape of the electoral map, we don't have a good idea of new faces, we don't know what the domestic and international environment will be like.”

Zuraidah pointed out that the opposition is good at keeping their cards close to their chest, giving the example of the Workers' Party (WP) Low Thia Khiang keeping his plan to leave Hougang and compete in Aljunied a secret until the last moment.

However, despite this “fog”, Zuraidah had some ideas of what to expect.

1. Opposition seen as a check on government, and not a government-in-waiting

Firstly, she said that the Singapore voter views the opposition as a check on government, and not a potential government.

Zuraidah said: “The opposition is not a government-in-waiting, and not what the voters expect from them. Instead, they serve as a check on the ruling party.”

She explained that opposition parties reflect Singaporeans' desire to impose a certain level of accountability on that government, and this won't change in 2020.

She added this is why most voters don't expect opposition parties to have fully-formed platforms and voting proposals, even if the PAP finds this frustrating.

Zuraidah said that most elections ultimately are about the level of accountability that voters seek from the government, instead of seeking to change the government entirely.

“Clearly the electorate wants some opposition, but either too much or too little makes the public nervous.”

Zuraidah mentioned the opposition’s proposal that it needs to deny the PAP of the super-majority of two-thirds of Parliamentary seats to let the opposition block Constitutional changes, as a way to break out of the traditional cycle.

However, she said that there is no evidence this strategy has been effective so far.

2. No grand coalition

The second given is that the opposition parties will not form any grand coalition.

She said that while minor parties may team up, and bigger parties may have informal pacts to avoid three-cornered fights, they will not formally join together.

Although Singaporeans see this “disunity” as explaining the opposition’s lack of success, Zuraidah said that this actually reflects the voters’ uncertainty over the type of opposition they want in the first place.

There currently is no clear strategy that will get support from both the hardcore anti-establishment voter and the more moderate voter.

So opposition parties have to choose between differentiating itself “sharply” from the PAP, or acting as “PAP-lite”.

Zuraidah also mentioned that Singaporeans are divided over the style of opposition they want, whether an opposition MP should be measured and calm, or bolder in challenging the PAP politicians.

However, this is not unique to Singapore.

She referred to the recent announcement of a coalition between the smaller parties of the Singaporean First party (SingFirst), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), People’s Power Party (PPP) and Reform Party (RP), but predicted that it would not help their electoral chances.

On the other hand, she felt that the Tan Cheng Bock factor was a groundbreaking moment in Singapore’s political history, with many older Singaporeans inspired by him to enter politics for the first time.

However, Tan may not be as familiar to younger voters, and his strategy of casting himself as someone who will reclaim the old PAP may not work with them.

3. Opposition will remain underdogs, and benefit from it

The third constant is that the opposition will continue to benefit from the underdog advantage.

While Singaporeans may not favour multi-party democracy, they do have an innate sense of “fair play”.

Zuraidah said:

“In their own lives, there are enough Singaporeans who feel the system favours privileged elites. So it is not surprising they identify with candidates who seem to be victims of an overbearing government. The Opposition plays the underdog card, and the government seems to know this.”

Zuraidah said that the government knows it cannot tilt the field to such an extent as to make elections lose their legitimacy.

She said that this advantage means that voters may give the opposition more leeway, as the government's "attacks" on the opposition may backfire if they are seen as over the top.

Zuraidah said:

"The PAP must be hoping that the government's allegations against the Workers' Party over its handling of finances will persuade voters that they can't be trusted to run town councils. But it's quite possible that the "smears" just won't be discounted by the public, but will fire up voters to lend their support to a beleaguered opposition."

She referred to the WP's success in raising S\$1 million in three days with just one online post, and said that this was a sign that the PAP could not afford to ignore.

PAP's secrets to success

Meanwhile, Lam said that the PAP had somehow managed to defy Duverger's Law.

Named after the French political scientist Maurice Duverger, it states that there is a correlation between the use of a first-past-the-post voting system (which Singapore has) and the formation of a two-party system (which Singapore does not have).

"Every domination bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction," said Duverger, and the examples of the Indian National Congress in India, the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan and the Barisan Nasional coalition in Malaysia seemed to bear it out.

But the PAP is the exception to the rule.

Lam said that the PAP's quality of leadership and the successful transition of power were important factors in its success.

But Singapore's lack of proportional representation voting system may have helped too, as evidenced by the 2011 general election.

Just under 40 per cent of voters did not vote for the PAP, but this did not translate into a proportional opposition presence in Parliament.

Lam further added that the PAP managed to shore up their support by providing for the citizens' needs, such as affordable housing and healthcare, and was able to shift its policies according to the desires of the electorate.

Will Lee Hsien Yang or Li Hongyi get involved?

During the question-and-answer session, an audience member asked about the impact of the potential entry of Lee Hsien Yang, brother of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the next general election, as well as the sons of the Lee brothers, including PM Lee's son Li Hongyi.

Lam said:

"That's really very speculative. If you put a gun against my head and ask if Lee Hsien Yang will be standing in the election, I think the best thing is to ask him. I suspect he may provide political funding to one particular political party.

He actually expressed quite openly that he is sympathetic to Tan Cheng Bock's party. But whether he stands as a candidate, I mean he is a Singapore citizen. It is the prerogative of all Singapore citizens to stand as a candidate."

Concerning Li Hongyi, Lam said there will be a "buzz" in Singapore if he were to run in the forthcoming election.

However, Lam feels that he should do so in this election rather than the next one, because of age.

But if Li were to run, Lam felt that Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat will be viewed as a "seat-warmer", even though he thought this was unfair.

Lam said that whoever ran for Parliament had to prove themselves to be elected, even if they happened to belong to the Lee family.

“Many things can happen, right? Many things can happen. So I think he’s too young, in fact... I’m really skating on thin ice,” said Lam, to laughter from the audience.