

SINGAPORE

S'poreans are no longer sheep

Gillian Koh says dialogue between S'poreans and Govt reached new levels

MY 2008
IN SINGAPORE

KENNY CHEE

IN A country often criticised for the sheep-like mentality of its people, it may surprise some that dialogue and engagement on issues between the Government and Singaporeans this year reached new levels, according to a political analyst.

Asked yesterday what her highlight for 2008 was, Dr Gillian Koh noted that she felt state and society relations are maturing, and named three examples.

"There is a greater understanding between both parties on how to engage each other to discuss and negotiate different points of view and issues," said the senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies.

The first incident she cited was the escape of terrorist Mas Selamat Kastari in February. She cited how local netizens were quick to voice their opinions online on government accountability.

Dr Koh said the Prime Minister had explained in response



ENCOURAGED: Dr Gillian Koh is heartened by the greater understanding between citizens and the Government. (PHOTO: THE STRAITS TIMES)

that he would not encourage asking officials or ministers to resign when something went wrong, regardless of whether they were directly involved, "to prevent risk averseness in the public service".

Another major debate which also began in February was over

Singapore's budget surplus. Dr Koh said it stood out because of the level of public displeasure and how the Finance Minister had taken pains to explain how the surplus was derived and why it was a boon to the country.

Dr Koh's third example was

the Serangoon Gardens debate on dormitories for foreign workers being built in the estate which flared up in September, in which a group of residents had mobilised to articulate their displeasure.

She noted how the Government and other stakeholders had tried to negotiate a settlement.

These examples, said Dr Koh, showed how citizens had learnt how to use many channels of communication to air their views, like online media such as blogs or organised groups.

"People are asking to be engaged and consulted (by the Government) as opposed to just being silent or complaining in coffee shops," she said.

At the same time, she noted that the Government had progressed as well in being less aloof and not dismissing the people's views.

"Each side is trying to find how to best put their points across to be heard and be taken seriously," said Dr Koh.

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HELPDESK 我的字典

Surplus:
结余 jié yú

Boon: 利益 lì yì