

Managing diversity in a crowded country

Singapore is known for strong government but civil society pressure and the advent of the internet have shown the need for pragmatism and adaptation in meeting the challenges of a multi-racial society, writes **Gillian Koh**

The governing party in Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP), celebrated 50 years in power in 2009. And, as if to mark this, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a raft of reforms to allow for a greater prospect of opposition voices in the single-chamber Parliament.

In a Westminster-style first-past-the-post system, the outcome of regular general elections held every five years or so has been the overwhelming dominance of the PAP. This has been reinforced by a Singaporean innovation called the Group Representation Constituency to ensure that a multi-racial slate of representatives are elected to represent large minority constituencies.

The lack of proportionality in what scholars have termed this 'hyper-majoritarian' system means that, after the last general election in 2006, 33.3 percent of the popular vote for opposition parties translated into only two duly elected opposition MPs amid 82 from the PAP camp. Since independence in 1965, the high watermark of opposition representation in the house was achieved in 1991, when only four members were not from the ruling party.

The 2009 proposal, now law, entrenches a system of nominated MPs that invites nine outstanding spokespeople of certain interest groups to sit in the house. It also expands a system of non-constituency MPs where up to nine best-performing losers among opposition politicians are likewise invited to take up seats in the house if there is a shortfall of duly elected members. While these two groups are restricted from voting on supply bills, motions of no confidence and acts to change the constitution, these innovations provide platforms for a diverse group of opposition politicians and civil society actors to prove their worth. They are evidence of a Singaporean trait of trying to improve on something when possible.

While most in Singapore will agree that a tiny, resource-challenged, complex multi-racial society requires strong government to lead it through an increasingly uncertain world, they also want ways in which oppositional voices, alternative world views and some system of checks and balances for accountability all have a place at the highest levels of government. This would



Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister

ensure that policies are as inclusive as possible, that the country is not blind-sided by 'group-think', and that the government is kept honest.

The development of civil society has been very much part of that story. Its impetus, especially from the late 1980s, stemmed from a perceived need to temper the unitary views of the PAP. This was the case with nature conservation, procreation policies that were deemed elitist and arts policy, as well as the representation of the interests of ethnic minorities. Today's emerging civil society organisations and movements take on issues such as the rights of low-wage migrant workers, environmental protection, and those related to the difficult question of values, like gambling and gay rights. More critically, they now seek to effect broader discussions and social change in society than simply targeting their advocacy towards the policy-makers.

Recognising the passion and merit behind such organisations, the rules governing civil society have been relaxed to make it easier to register, assemble, and express alternative views. The government has also institutionalised the process of public consultation in its policy-making process to tap these energies and expertise outside of an otherwise highly competent bureaucracy.

What controls remain or have been introduced are on overt political activities or those deemed to be so. Political parties and associations go through a full review

process before they are registered and are required to abide by a Political Donations Act that circumscribes support from foreign sources. Political films are vetted by a government-appointed independent advisory panel, to allow those deemed to be factual and objective to be used in elections. Registration is required of political web-sites whether of parties or individuals.

The government's concerns are three-fold: first, that domestic politics is left to citizens to shape and decide upon; second, that partisan political activities are properly presented as such; and third, that no organisations, meetings or media output are allowed to disturb the racial and religious harmony that requires on-going attention.

In the internet age in which we now live, total control is impossible and also damages the credibility of the regime, unless national security is proven to be at stake. A measure of 'reasonableness' has to be exercised.

Critical points of view on politics and policies in Singapore can be found on the web. Some have been pointed enough to precipitate formal responses in Parliament by the front bench. This is how the government has been held to account for, say, the performance of Temasek Holdings (an investment company managing government assets) and the impact of globalisation on jobs and wages.

Citizens are participating actively in the political process and the government is learning to adjust to these trends by engaging the people.

It is difficult to say what the next 50 years hold for Singapore but if its people envisage an innovative, cosmopolitan yet humane global city, we must demonstrate both the ability to welcome and manage diversity in this dense urban environment. The intermingling of races, cultures, religious outlooks, social classes, political ideals and personal aspirations will be inevitable. If the boundaries of these identities can be relatively porous we can be sure that the best is yet to come. ●

Dr Gillian Koh is Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore