

Radio Singapore International, Singapore's evolving political environment, 19 Jan 2005.

Singapore's evolving political environment

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What has the political environment in Singapore been like since Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong took over the leadership reins in August last year?

That was the question discussed at a seminar organized by the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore today.

Melanie Yip with more in this report.

A political buzz of change. That's what Mr Lee has brought about since he became Prime Minister. This according to Dr Derek de Cunha, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of South East Asian Studies, or ISEAS in Singapore.

DDC: In less than 6 months into his tenure as Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong has generated a political buzz of change in the air. He has spoken about the need to have a mindset change, and to be less conventional. He has highlighted the new openness of discussions and debates in recent times, but also said that he thought this could go further as long as people took responsibility for their views and opinions. The new Prime Minister also encouraged Singaporeans to come forward, it seemed quite a few people took up Mr Lee's invitation when it came round to selecting a new slate of Nominated Members of Parliament. There was a record 37 applicants for the 9 slots. That seemed a positive sign.

Certainly, that sign can be attributed to the positive image of the new Prime Minister that has been etched out since he took office in August last year.

Mr Lee has moved towards a political environment that is more open, and inclusive, by listening to the voices of both his Cabinet members, and ordinary Singaporeans.

DDC: Mr Lee Hsien Loong has to carry his cabinet colleagues with him. And the different shades of opinions, the different inclinations, the conservative, liberal instincts amongst the cabinet colleagues will ultimately be reflected in any decision that he eventually chooses to take. I think, gradual opening up of society, a process commenced by his predecessor (Goh Chok Tong) will probably be what we can expect to continue over the next 5-6 years or more.

While enthusiasm is evident in terms of more political representation, Dr de Cunha notes that Singaporeans, generally, are politically apathetic. And this may be due to the lack of relevance of politics to their daily lives.

DCC: In the ultimate analysis, a person's sense or degree of political empowerment might be determined by his station in life, his own convictions and the relationship he chooses or chooses not to have with the governing party. For many Singaporeans, the

notion of political empowerment has little relevance to their lives. What is more recognizable to them is the notion of good governance. In a PAP-dominated Singapore, many Singaporeans do see and have personally experienced good governance on a daily basis. To that extent, many are quite prepared to let the government decide on the things for them. Paradoxically, a near monopoly of parliamentary seats by the PAP has resulted in some section of the population having ever higher expectations of the government, to constantly improve the people's material well-being.

This is why there needs to be a balance in people's dependence on the government, says Dr de Cunha.

DCC: To a great extent, some sections of the population have a dependency complex in relation to the government. Many Singaporeans appear far more comfortable with that condition and any notion on trying to empower themselves politically. A population too dependent or reliant on the government for its material needs may become a potential problem. Thus, the government's attempts to nurture what it refers to as a civic society, that is an active citizen refostered towards helping others in need, in a limited welfare like fashion.

Dr Derek de Cunha, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of South East Asian Studies ending that report by Melanie Yip.