

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

In the Singapore Perspectives 2013 conference held on 28 January, Singapore Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong engaged in a broad-ranging discussion of the future direction that governance in Singapore might take. In a no-holds-barred exchange on his government's past record and suggestions from participants on modifying the governance system, PM Lee's main message was that the country's governance system must be designed to "suit the temper of Singaporeans" and to address the most likely trends that will shape Singapore in the future.

Launching the conference, Director of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Janadas Devan, said that the founding fathers of Singapore did not see their first scenario of Singapore's future come to pass. Today, Singapore operates today under the second scenario and is a thriving but independent sovereign city-state. While thinking about the future can be a difficult task as reality can override the most comprehensive predictions, it is in this spirit that IPS engaged in a scenario-planning exercise to chart out how Singapore might govern itself in 2022.

Behind Singapore's Brand of Governance

The speakers of the first panel discussed the fundamental principles of governance and political culture in Singapore and whether the current demands for greater political pluralism will precipitate a sea change in its governance system.

Professor Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the first speaker and she proposed that the core values of governance that Singaporeans have imbibed and value are meritocracy; zero tolerance of corruption; diversity of race, language, religion and culture; and rule of law. Singaporeans now want a better implementation of these ideals. The impetus for political change and the trends for Singapore to become a "normal democracy" can no longer be contained — more people are now in the professional and managerial occupational class and more have attained tertiary education and are educated abroad than ever before. Singaporeans will therefore expect to play a greater role in governance.

In response, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) shared three possible scenarios those trends might lead Singapore: the first, an extension of the relatively smooth transition from the current "soft authoritarianism" to greater political pluralism and a participative democracy; the second, a hard landing, where the ruling party loses power; and the third, of political gridlock and paralysis because society is deeply divided on its views on governance. Professor Tommy Koh, Special Adviser to the IPS, added a fourth scenario of coalition government, citing some examples in Europe of effective governance in this manner.

Questions in the first session focused on political culture and liberalisation. A consensus emerged that the political context has changed greatly since the General Election in 2011, as people now have different needs. The political opposition is not yet ready to take over, but will continue to provide an avenue for people preferring an alternative voice and to offer a check on the dominant party and government.

Re-interpreting Existing Principles of Governance

In the second session, Lawrence Wong, Acting Minister at the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and Senior Minister of State at the Ministry of Communications and Information, talked about the need for new interpretations of existing principles of governance in the light of societal change, the impact of globalisation and technological change. While most people he had encountered value meritocracy because it ensures fairness and social justice, he acknowledged that it is important to have a broader definition of meritocracy, and that Singapore needs a new set of social norms to complement meritocracy, to ensure that there is a full measure of social mobility in Singapore.

Another aspect of governance he addressed was for a more calibrated relationship between the market and the state, citing how the government had managed the state's development of the liquefied natural gas terminal in light of market failure. On the other hand, when the Public Utilities Board was privatised, it was found that the pressure of market discipline created greater efficiency in the energy market to the benefit of consumers. These examples show that there has to be a more pragmatic and strategic way in deciding whether the state and market have a role in providing key public goods.

A third point was that there is a public desire for a greater role for civil society in governance. He shared that in the course his dialogue sessions as part of the "Our Singapore Conversation", a new term was brought up: "unpolicy". This describes a ground-up approach to addressing public needs that does not require government intervention, which he applauded.

A fourth point was the need for a different form of leadership — a flipped model which recognises that a lot of the expertise needed for responsive policy-making lies with the people. He shared that Singaporeans should continue to aspire towards sustaining a democracy of deeds rather than one of words, a problem-solving democracy rather than an adversarial one.

In response, Donald Low, Senior Fellow and Assistant Dean (Research Centres) at the LKYSPP discussed the need for institutions that develop resilience, or the ability of a system to bounce back to a state that allows it to continue to function well. Two things are necessary for this: exposure to shocks to inoculate the system and the accommodation of competing ideas and policy options. Policy experimentation should be welcomed as a governance process. In an age of disruptive change, the instinct is to respond by asserting greater control, but he urged the government to tap alternative voices to access robust solutions for the future.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, participants and speakers discussed how Singapore institutions could be modified to promote resilience. Two skills that civil servants would need were first, the capacity to facilitate broad-ranging discussions that include a broader

segment of citizens into policy-making, and second, the capacity to conduct experimentation at the local level in order to test policy options on the ground before they are judged to be suitable for implementation at the national level.

Findings of the IPS Prism Survey

In the third session, Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at the IPS shared the findings of the IPS Prism Survey. The survey gathered the views of participants in the IPS Prism Immersive Arts Experience. Participants were invited to fill in the survey form on their own volition. Respondents tended to be young, middle-class, and single. The survey aimed to create a values map of the participants who have viewed the IPS Prism materials and is therefore not representative of the views of the Singaporean public. This was to provide some signals of the trends and values that might shape governance over the next decade.

Survey respondents felt that governance should be morally directed and favoured a big state that would provide the basics like housing, healthcare, transport and education but in a way that would ‘teach citizens how to fish’ than give them fish – to empower. They also felt the elderly should receive priority for state support, but not at the expense of youths. Lastly, the political system should also ensure that there is a good representation of the interests and concerns of everyone across society.

The first speaker of the third session, Nizam Ismail, Director of the Association of Muslim Professionals, and Chairman for the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs, appealed for a new equilibrium in the relationship between state and civil society in Singapore. He favoured a model where the government enables civil society and provides a structure for it to thrive; where government and civil society work in partnership to address public needs and concerns. He felt that civil society had so far struggled to find a space for itself — especially in its role of public advocacy — and if not properly addressed, Singaporeans may feel a sense of disenchantment because they are unable to participate fully in the policy-making and political processes of the country.

The second speaker, Sylvia Lim, Chairman of The Workers’ Party and Member of Parliament for Aljunied Group Representation Constituency said that the IPS Prism survey reinforced the notion that Singaporeans want the governance process to focus on and address the sense of well-being rather than economic growth. Opposition parties can play a role through suggesting policies that promote good governance by raising issues in parliament; keeping check on the implementation of policies on the ground;; and engaging government ministries to improve the design of policies. It is possible for opposition parties to practise “give and take” with the governing party in this manner, if there is a culture of mutual respect.

The third speaker, Lee Tzu Yang, Member of the IPS Academic Panel, focused on the key themes of the IPS Prism Scenarios in his remarks. He said that trust in the government and governance was dependent not only on political leadership and politicians but also on how state institutions are playing their roles. It is important for these institutions, like the civil service and

the judiciary, to be strengthened to ensure that good governance prevails regardless of how politics play out. Singapore's resilience will also be determined by how able citizens are in solving issues on their own.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, participants asked if there were areas where there should be a clearer demarcation between the government and the governing party. Sylvia Lim said that this should be explored, especially in relation to how the People's Association and the Town Councils are constituted and run. She did say, however, that the Community Development Councils for instance, though headed by mayors of the governing party, did offer assistance to constituents of opposition wards and they therefore did not face prejudice. A participant felt that the findings of the survey were far too optimistic — he questioned if Singaporeans would really be willing to pay the price of providing more social support as suggested in the IPS Prism Survey, and whether in the current zero-sum competitive game in society, fellow citizens would really support the ethic of “progressing together” if it means they might have to be held back or be placed at the same level as others.

The closing session was a dialogue with the PM Lee. Participants posed questions on how the government responds to Singapore's changing political culture as it becomes a “normal democracy”. PM Lee reiterated his government's commitment to the social progress of Singapore; that the government's responsibility remained primarily to its people and also that not all solutions come in the form of monetary support. Some of the ways to precipitate social progress will rise from the role of citizens and civil society as well. It will be important to look at how non-government actors contribute to the development of social capital. How governance and government function will be shaped by the “temper of the people” – what were their values, what matters to them. Finally, a more cohesive society would make for constructive politics.

Responding to questions about whether the government had not effectively anticipated the demands of infrastructure that came with an increase in population over the past decade, the PM explained in detail the context of Singapore's foreign manpower policy and how its foresight was not 20/20. The government had attempted to ride the wave of rapid growth in the mid-2000s after the lag in economic growth at the beginning of the millennium, therefore sought to take the opportunity to boost growth when the opportunities presented themselves..PM Lee explained that it is difficult to predict the future, but the government will create a greater buffer in the provision of infrastructure to make the system more resilient.

PM Lee stressed the continued importance of meritocracy. He noted that it was important for each person to feel that they have a chance to move up in life in his or her generation through hard work, regardless of family background. The elite should feel a responsibility to give back to society. The definition of success in Singapore could encompass not just the academically inclined but others as well, such as sportsmen and artists.

In response to whether there would be a further devolution of power to, for instance, a separate system of elections for municipal government headed by mayors, PM Lee said that it would be unwieldy to do so. For instance, investors now only need to deal with central government rather than negotiate at multiple levels to conduct their business here.

In the remaining dialogue session, a wide range of questions were discussed. This included suggestions of modifications to the governance system in Singapore, such as the introduction of a freedom of information law, an independent electoral commission and a proportional representation system.

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For more information on the IPS Prism Survey, please go to http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/synopsis_p2013.aspx