

SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES2017

What If?

“What if Singapore becomes a two or multi-party system?”

By Ho Kwon Ping

After Donald Trump’s almost surreal inauguration just three days ago, IPS’ conference entitled “What If” appears not just prescient in hindsight, but is an urgently needed exercise in future-think. The unthinkable has become the improbable and now the quite possible throughout an increasingly uncertain world.

So, what is the unthinkable, improbable, what-if political scenario for Singapore?

Here, IPS is being coy with its disingenuously bland topic: “What if Singapore becomes a two or multi-party system?” After all, unless IPS believes Singapore is like Cuba or North Korea, it’s quite obvious that we are already a multi-party system to the extent that multiple parties freely and openly contend in general elections. But as a one-party dominant system we do not have a pendulum democracy where a dynamic political equilibrium is sustainable over the long term through political power alternating between two dominant parties providing checks and balance against each other.

IPS’ real question is what in my recent book entitled [*The Ocean in a Drop — Singapore: The Next Fifty Years*](#), I called the elephant-in-the-room issue: What if one-party dominance is broken, the PAP loses in a general election and another government comes to power?

Now, the PAP itself has already considered this possibility long ago, which Mr Lee Kuan Yew foresaw as a “freak election” where an electorate may (in his view) unintentionally and irresponsibly vote out the PAP. His solution was to create the Elected Presidency as a check against what he considered a “rogue government”.

(Ironically the law of unintended consequences made a rogue President a greater likelihood than a rogue government – a new headache which is

presumably now being resolved — but whilst a fascinating issue, this topic is a digression from our main issue today.)

What if, however, a freak election is not a freak event but instead becomes institutionalised and Singapore does become a pendulum democracy? Is this good, bad, or neutral for Singaporeans? How likely is it going to happen?

A traditional liberal would welcome this prospect as a sign of progress towards full participatory democracy. After all, Western liberal democracy has as one of its touchstones, the concept of a two-party pendulum democracy as the bulwark of long-term, sustainable governance. However, after Brexit, Donald Trump and other recent or upcoming EU elections, faith in traditional Western liberal democracy has been severely shaken enough for it to no longer be the yardstick by which political maturity or sustainability is measured.

A more universal and comprehensive yardstick is the quality of the social contract between a political leadership and its body politic regardless of whether the formal political structure is a two-party pendulum democracy, a monopolistic Communist regime, or in a single-party dominant system. The depth of that social contract and by implication, the political legitimacy of the ruling elite, depends on a complex and yet subtle blend of factors for which successive Chinese dynasties coined the euphemism, the mandate of heaven.

Should that mandate ever erode beyond repair, no amount of two-party or multi-party democracy can save a political regime or ruling dynasty. Traditional pendulum politics does not by itself guarantee genuine participatory democracy: the present crisis of liberal democracy and lurch towards extremism and populism in the US and Europe is eloquent testimony to this depressing reality.

Against this backdrop then, the critical question facing Singapore in 2065 is not simply whether an accidental freak election or a sustainable pendulum democracy should or might occur. It is about whether the social contract between elite governance and the body politic can become so strained and frayed that a crisis of political legitimacy may thrust unexpected, extremist scenarios ranging from rule by a military-dominated junta, or unstable coalition governments, to become reality.

In other words, what might happen to get us from where we are now, a bastion of political stability, to the uncertainties now plaguing the rest of the world?

Let me ask and then answer three further questions in pursuit of this issue.

First, what events could lead to a massive loss of legitimacy or confidence in the PAP or the current political system?

Second, what are the chances of these events happening?

Third, is a two-party pendulum democracy a likely, stable and sustainable option? Alternatively, what might realistically evolve instead, in the specific Singapore context?

Let me address the first question in a circumspect manner, by alluding to other Asian democracies. The closest though imperfect parallels, are India and Taiwan. In both countries, the founding party of the nation — the Indian National Congress and the Kuomintang (KMT) — were led by charismatic leaders — Jawaharlal Nehru and Chiang Kai Shek, who were worlds apart both in personalities as well as in their party structures, but possessed as founding fathers, an unquestioned legitimacy. After their passing, their offspring — Indira Gandhi and Chiang Ching-kuo — succeeded them (albeit with brief interludes in India) but after them, both the party leadership and party itself started to decline.

Three identical things happened in both parties:

First, nepotism prevented the rise of younger, meritocratic elites vying within the party for ascendancy, resulting in sycophants all clustering around the dynastic heirs, like in some archaic monarchy.

Second, the values, policies and solutions which led the founding party to success became sacrosanct: sacred cows which could not be questioned even if their relevance started to wane. A sense of political complacency settled like fine dust over even the internal insurgents and overcame any impetus towards change.

Third, a culture of entitlement led to endemic corruption both political and financial, the final blow in an inexorable decline of legitimacy.

Should that fate, which has befallen almost all founding parties in electoral democracies over time, affect the PAP in coming decades, we have the scenario for disruptive change.

The second question is: how likely is this to happen?

The short answer is: not very likely (I hope) in the next quarter-century, or around 20 to 25 years. Beyond that, no one knows.

Why 20 years — perhaps too optimistic for some and too pessimistic for others? I chose this time span because I assume that under our present system, even when Mr Lee Hsien Loong retires, he will assume the mantle of senior minister or minister mentor, and his cohort of leaders will remain like tribal elders to guide successive leadership teams not so much in policymaking but in the preservation of the political values, self-discipline, and vision which congeal into a lasting political culture.

History has shown that the values of a founding political culture can usually be transmitted with vigour down three to four generations. Beyond that, complacency and entitlement usually overwhelm the messianic urgency and self-discipline found in pioneer values. One can only hope that future PAP leaders, after our current leadership have long passed from the scene, can learn from history.

They will have a few advantages, not least being that as a young nation, a new political culture of anti-corruption, meritocracy and multi-culturalism did not have to battle the centuries of deep divisions which afflicted say, Indian civilisation. But as Sri Lanka's civil war has shown, a relatively short period of self-serving political opportunism and populism can spiral out of control rapidly. And who is to say, from what we have already seen with the descent into opportunism in even mature, developed European and American societies, that our future leaders will be so self-disciplined as to eschew even a shred of self-interest, especially if their popularity starts to wane?

As for nepotism, there are no current signs of this happening with a Lee dynasty clinging to power or promoting only its relatives. Anti-corruption has now become not just government policy but a fundamental value of our people. And the government has shown signs that even sacred cow policies can be re-examined if they are no longer relevant.

And so I remain, using that clichéd phrase, cautiously optimistic. But that is to some extent whistling in the dark. When I was a student in Taiwan in the late 1960s, no one could have imagined the decline of the KMT and its future electoral loss, or the rise of a seemingly radical party like the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). But it all happened in a few decades. And it can happen here too.

The third and possibly most intriguing question is whether the scenario leading towards pendulum democracy in Singapore is the most desirable and likely long-term outcome? And if not, what are alternatives?

Here we have a conundrum. History has generally shown, despite recent events in the West, that a pendulum democracy offers more a more sustainable, dynamic equilibrium than a single-party dominant system which has no competition and falls into complacent entitlement.

On the other hand, to move from the generally well-governed stability of our current single-party dominant system to a pendulum democracy implies that a massive loss of legitimacy by the ruling party has to first occur. That is not necessarily desirable, and of course not even likely given the current robustness of the PAP and the weakness of the opposition parties.

The danger of a single party-dominant system is political ossification over time, as the sense of entitlement encourages the nepotism, complacency and corruption which inevitably led to the demise – and eventual re-emergence of course — of even the most idealistic founding parties.

Therefore one viable alternative is to institutionalise internal policy competition and deepen internal democracy within the PAP, beyond just secret elections to a central committee or politburo.

Several very different Asian political parties — from Japan to China to Vietnam — already have intra-party competition through competing internal factions and cliques, overseen and endorsed by an informal cabal of elders. It can produce a reasonably sustainable succession process where competition allows the most capable and broadly popular leaders to emerge.

However, because this is largely informal it is subject to back-room intrigues and horse-trading to the benefit of influential kingmakers. It is also a competition over individuals, and not a competition of ideas.

An attempt to institutionalise a transparent internal competition process not just for leadership roles but between party caucuses which represent different philosophical or policy tendencies, may be an innovative and sustainable way to combat complacency in long-ruling founding parties.

By itself however, internal party competition cannot assure that a political elite will remain relevant to the needs of a changing population. On the contrary, civil society must be further empowered as a partner to strengthen the social contract, and also as a check against inept or corrupt governance.

This involves nourishing civil society players with that lifeblood of robust discussion: freely available and largely unrestricted information. It's something I advocated during my last [IPS-Nathan Lecture](#), and I notice that we're already steadily improving on that front. The notion that the less information the public have equates to the less they can criticise, is a natural, universal bureaucratic impulse which is slowly giving way to the realisation that wide and deep access to information is a key measure of participatory democracy.

Access to information enables the public to robustly debate and articulate ground-up responses to the pressing societal issues of today. An information-rich society is all the more important since we've seen in the recent US presidential elections, how social media can easily distort facts and even manufacture dis-information.

Our government was prescient to warn about the inherent flaws and anti-democratic dangers of unfettered social media, but the preservation of a social contract that is beginning to fray cannot be achieved by an instinctive knee-jerk clampdown on social media, even if it were possible in the digital age.

The solution is not in more regulation and censorship, but in more citizen watchdogs monitoring falsehoods and pointing these out. Lies can only be destroyed by the sunlight of diverse and plentiful sources of the truth.

In conclusion, 2065 is a destination for which the journey is fraught with uncertainties. The simplistic solution which traditional liberal democrats have held out — a pendulum form of democracy — is not necessarily the most desirable nor most likely scenario. Yet the track record of continuously ruling founding parties has not been good. How the PAP can

reinvent itself with the benefit of historical hindsight to ensure robust internal competition, and also truly engage civil society in genuine participatory democracy, will shape the future of our nation.

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