

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Global Trends, Social Movements and Democracy

By Jun Jie WOO

[This session](#), moderated by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, focused on the political dimensions of global trends on Singapore. The panel speakers included Dr Terence Chong, Deputy Director and Senior Fellow of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, and Dr Roberto Foa, Co-Director of the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy. The discussants on the panel were Mr Aaron Maniam, Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Communications and Information, and Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim, Deputy Executive Editor of the *South China Morning Post*.

Opening Remarks by Dr Roberto Foa

Dr Roberto Foa's presentation cited data from the Global Satisfaction with Democracy dataset, the World Values Survey, the YouGov Globalism Survey, and the YouGov Singapore polls. Based on this data, he observed that there has been rising dissatisfaction with political institutions across the world. Singapore broadly tracks these trends, with a slight decline in levels of satisfaction with democracy. However, YouGov Singapore data shows that citizen satisfaction with government rose with pandemic management success in 2020.

Across the world, political polarisation and "demonisation" has been on the rise, with an emerging intergenerational divide. Younger people are more likely to demonise political opponents than older people. However, there has been very little partisan division in Singapore. Singapore has also experienced little increase in exclusionary identity politics. Few respondents in Singapore would reject people of different religions or ethnicities. Subjectively perceived sexual harassment has also been low in Singapore. However, there is a slight generational divide in perceptions of sexual harassment, with younger people more likely to perceive sexual harassment in the workplace.

As part of the anti-globalisation backlash, there have been high anti-immigration sentiments across the world. More respondents believe that immigration is costly rather than beneficial. Singapore is not entirely immune to this trend, although these sentiments are driven by economics and not identity politics, he said. Significant number of respondents supported strong limits to reduce immigration. Large numbers of respondents believe that globalisation benefits the wealthy, and that employers should support locals. However, few respondents in Singapore believe that immigration increases social conflict. A large number of Singaporean respondents seem to be open to emigration, being willing to live overseas, and much of this is driven by cost of living and income considerations.

In sum, confidence in political institutions appears to be on the decline, although overall satisfaction with government remains high in Singapore. There has been little evidence of political polarisation and exclusionary identity politics in Singapore, although there are some anti-immigrant sentiments, driven by economic concerns such as cost of living and inequality.

Opening Remarks by Dr Terence Chong

Dr Chong argued that democracy was on the decline across the world. Much of this could be attributed to widespread anger with the political establishment as well as the economic elite. Anti-establishment movements have emerged across the right and left of the spectrum, challenging political norms.

While there is only one form of accepted democracy: liberal democracy, there are also different forms of democracy, with institutions such as the media and trade unions playing different roles in different forms of democracies. Regardless of the form of democracy, populism appears to be on the rise.

Dr Chong described two types of populism: populism that attempts to paint elite groups as uncaring; and populism as demand for economic goods, such as free education and healthcare. The second populism comes as a backlash against perceived socio-cultural change. This invokes the conservative majority responding to liberalism and perceived threats to their ways of life, such as the cultural and economic changes brought about by globalism. A consequence of this is a cultural war.

As an open economy, Singapore cannot help but be affected by these changes. As a meritocratic and increasingly class-stratified society, Singapore is at risk of the first form of populism. Citing IPS surveys, Dr Chong argued that class divide was increasingly entrenched across Singaporean society. Hot topics of the General Election in 2011 include anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments, overcrowding and strains to public transport and housing supply, and the perception that political elite is out of touch.

As Singapore becomes a more deeply stratified society, resentment against political establishment and elites will also lurk beneath the surface. While meritocracy rewards hard work, children from upper- and middle-class families enjoy an unfair advantage. Therefore, social situation and economic standing become a measure of social standing and value, which can give rise to new fault lines.

Another fault line described was the clash of values. This is associated with the second form of populism, although this is less evident in Singapore, which manifests in a backlash among older populations against liberal norms and post-material values that have emerged with global economic liberalism. More frequent examples of clash of values in Singapore include the parliamentary debate to abolish 377A in 2007, the AWARE saga in 2009, and religious and conservative opposition to the opening of the casinos in 2010.

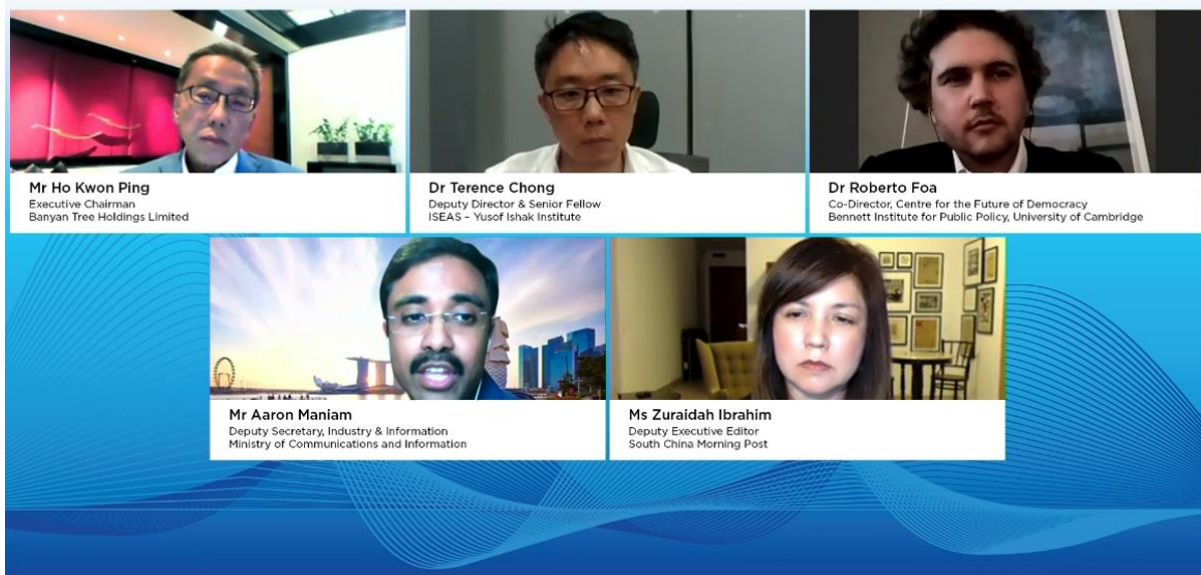
Dr Chong also noted the new wave of liberal values, such as woke culture and cancel culture. He also pointed out that there had been more public discussion of race and ethnicity, citing examples such as actor Dennis Chew's "brownface" incident, and the Facebook post by Raeesah Khan that resurfaced during the 2020 General Election. He described how tolerance

for perceived racial discrimination has declined among younger Singaporeans. However, cultural backlash has not fully materialised in Singapore politics, despite fault lines deepening.

Discussion

Mr Aaron Maniam noted the gradual shift in Singapore towards political division and polarisation, but that there are causes for hope. He agreed with Dr Chong that there are different forms of democracy, and that there is a need to define Singapore's form of democracy. Can Singapore's democracy be defined as a communitarian democracy, based on a multitude of different values? At the heart of communitarian democracy is a system where individuals participate in political life at regular intervals, but there is also a need for individuals to participate in political life at an everyday level, for example, in deliberative or participative democracy. This will help bring different ideas together and provide nuance, as Singapore faces more challenges ahead, he added. Participation also allows for the formation of multiple identities as people interact and engage with each other, he said, as well as collective learning about the complexity of issues that Singapore faces. Deliberative space can allow the different views and arguments to co-exist. There is a need to ensure that politics is inclusive, especially in terms of ability to participate in political life. This includes having the language and technology to participate in an increasingly online political life. There is a need for common infrastructure of truth.

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Caption for photo: Mr Aaron Maniam responding to the speakers' opening remarks.

Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim posed several questions for discussion. The questions directed at Dr Foa involved interpretations of data. She asked whether the questions posed to respondents in the surveys meant the same thing in different countries. For instance, the 20 per cent of Singapore respondents who expressed dissatisfaction with the government may argue that there is not enough democracy. Data on Singaporeans' confidence with pandemic handling is also open to interpretation. The low confidence point was in July 2020, which coincided with the General Election. This could be due to opposition parties questioning the government

during election, rather than an objective appraisal of government's pandemic response measures. She pointed out that data on people's attitude towards immigration is difficult to interpret, that anti-immigration sentiments themselves could be driven by political forces, and the intensity of anti-immigrant feelings are also important, not just the number of people who are anti-immigrant. A small minority of anti-immigrant sentiments can also cause disproportionate levels of violence and hate. Ms Ibrahim then asked Dr Chong if there were other forms of democracy to be found to be thriving in Southeast Asia. She also asked if the unhappiness in the 2011 General Election was a sign of populism or a reasonable reaction to policy failures.

Dr Foa agreed that survey data is a starting point for discussion, rather than an ending point. Dr Chong said different forms of democracies have different expectations of institutions within these democracies. The kinds of depression that the West is experiencing are not found in Southeast Asia. He also argued that populism did not emerge in a vacuum, and that there were real reasons that politicians and activists could be whipped into a frenzy.

Questions and Answers

One participant asked if, given the tide of anti-establishment sentiments, the panellists had ideas on how to "reset" the rules of engagement with citizens. Dr Chong identified how trust is important, and that the breakdown of political trust is stark in Western countries. He added that once trust was broken, misinformation could make it difficult for democracy to function. Meanwhile, Dr Foa described how the other side of trust was trustworthiness. In Western societies with rising inequality or malfeasance, elites had to be trustworthy and willing to respond to populist concerns.

A participant asked how opposing values could co-exist in the democratic ideal described by Mr Maniam. Mr Maniam said politics is something people *choose* to participate in, and that there is a sense of agency among citizens. He argued that initial opposition had to be dealt with through interpersonal encounters and interactions, rather than waiting for the system to act, as this would allow people to relate to each other through their multiple identities.

Questions were also raised on how the concept of meritocracy in Singapore might be changed, and how it plays a role when choosing leaders. Mr Maniam expressed the need to define merit in more diverse ways, beyond wealth and paper qualifications. He argued that there are multiple forms of excellence that need to be recognised. Dr Chong commented that as the largest employer, the state needed to take the lead in recognising different forms of talent and merit. He also pointed to changes in educational banding structures for students. He asked what could be done for the generations that missed out, and if the government could move fast enough when implementing these changes.

Ms Ibrahim argued that Singapore's leadership does not show enough internal diversity, and instead shows more uniformity, which differs from the first and second generations of leadership. She expressed her hope that the government is conscious of this and is working hard to address this issue. Otherwise, she believed that Singapore was headed towards the dangerous territory of groupthink and perhaps the eventual decline of the People's Action Party.

Questions were raised about how governments could strike a balance between the strident voices of social activists online and traditional offline constituents, and how people could interact across the digital divide. Mr Maniam described how governments around the world had to cater to both digital and analogue sets of constituents, pointing to the example of online and offline modes of communication to deliver information about the COVID-19 pandemic. He argued that there is a need to calibrate policy communications to include both online and analogue constituents, and that efforts to include more people in the digital sphere, such as Singapore's digital ambassadors, should be increased. Mr Ho noted that Singapore was ahead of the curve in regulation of online dialogue. Meanwhile, Dr Chong asserted that online activism was different from activism found in "real-life", as it could happen faster and take more liberties. Ms Ibrahim said there should not be any contention between digital and offline communications, and that policy communications need to apply across the board. However, she noted that human interaction could not be replaced by digital media. For example, she pointed to how the PAP's inability to conduct house-to-house visits during the GE2020 campaign likely affected their vote share.

Dr Foa raised a contrarian idea: rather than bridging the digital divide, to widen it instead. He argued that the problem of online space is that people are more aware of one another's opinions, which triggers frustrations and conflict. In his view, a communitarian democracy, would allow interactions to take place with more space among participants.

When asked what democracy would look like in the age of social media and influencers, with specific reference to some politicians becoming social media stars during the election, Ms Ibrahim said social media was here to stay, and the question was how to harness its positive benefits. She argued that politicians need self-discipline in knowing what to share and when to share it. She also noted that political leaders in Singapore have become more "human" to voters as a result of social media. Mr Maniam argued that social media could give rise to network effects for political life, enabling people to be reached with greater speed, scale and scope. However, there is also the risk of rumours and distortions spreading like wildfire. He asserted that a healthy democracy in the world of social media is one that has producers and users of social media who are more literate. Dr Chong said people are now looking for a certain sense of authenticity, and that they can assess whether it is genuine or contrived and manufactured. Meanwhile, Dr Foa described social media as fairly undemocratic, and not reflective of public opinion. He argued that politicians who responded to social media might be doing things that were not aligned with public opinion. He added that social media spaces were not egalitarian, as there were power differences, such as the one between influencers and those who did not use social media.

A participant asked how important it is for those in public service to strike a more non-partisan note. Mr Maniam said Singapore's public service operates in a Westminster democracy, and that its fundamental role is to serve the government of the day, regardless of the Party in power. From his own experience, he observed no examples of polarisation in the civil service. He emphasised how it is the role of the civil service to put out a diverse set of views and options and debate them vigorously, with implementation done in a way that represents fidelity to the public. A politicised public service is unhealthy for society, he noted.

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