

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Politics in Singapore

By Ysien LAU

The eleventh forum, [“Politics in Singapore 2030”](#), took place on the final day of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, in front of both a live and an online audience. Drawing on the deliberations from the first nine online forums of the conference, representatives from three political parties discussed how Singapore’s political landscape might develop in the next decade. The panel’s speakers included Dr Janil Puthucheary, the Whip of the People’s Action Party (PAP) and the Chairman of Young PAP; Mr Gerald Giam, treasurer of the Workers’ Party (WP) and a member of Singapore’s 14th Parliament, and Ms Hazel Poa, founding member of the Progress Singapore Party and a Non-Constituency Member of Singapore’s 14th Parliament. The panel was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.



Caption for photo: Mr Gerald Giam of the Workers’ Party (second from right) shares his opening remarks.

Opening Statement by Dr Janil Puthucheary

During his opening remarks, Dr Janil Puthucheary highlighted what he saw as key themes looking forward: identity, technology, COVID-19 and the economy, and politics.

With regard to identity, specifically race and religion, he observed that the conversations on these topics were becoming increasingly productive and open, and that there was a growing diversity of opinions. He described how in Singapore, there was an incentive to discuss topics relating to identity, as discourse on it had not led to negative consequences, unlike other countries where such topics had been exploited and weaponised for political reasons. Dr Puthuchearry expressed his belief that it was important to think carefully about these topics and how they would be approached, in order to better understand what it meant to Singapore and the country's sense of identity.

On the theme of technology, Dr Puthuchearry described how Singapore differed from other countries in that the government had played a key role in creating and defining its own tools, creating relevant infrastructure for technological development, rather than relying primarily on the private sector for technological innovation and development. Thus, he argued that the government's role was to ensure that no one was left behind, and that problems and divisions created by technology required solutions with a humanistic perspective.

Dr Puthuchearry said the way Singaporeans came together during the COVID-19 crisis gave him hope for the next decade, seeing the country's response as a demonstration of the country's cohesion and adaptability. He argued that the sense of unity, adaptability and resolve would be important when dealing with larger issues in the coming decade, such as climate change. However, he expressed his belief that some things would remain the same, that Singapore would remain a globally connected city, that the country's sense of self would be stronger and core values be passed down to successive generations, and that Singapore would be able to learn lessons from around the world and situate them in a local context.

At the end of his remarks, Dr Puthuchearry described how adaptability was at the core of the PAP, and that the party's strength was in their resolve to do what was right for Singaporeans. Dr Koh asked how values could be passed on to successive generations within the PAP, and whether adaptability meant some things needed to be cast out. Dr Puthuchearry replied that having new members step in at every election was one way of refreshing the party's world view and tools, and that having systems like understudying and working in groups helped to transmit values and a sense of purpose to new generations of members. He also argued that the internal workings within the party, in relation to policy, would gradually evolve to adapt to present societal values.

Opening Statement by Mr Gerald Giam

Mr Gerald Giam described the vision of the WP and what would be needed to reach these goals. This included helping Singaporeans achieve their dreams, creating a dynamic economy with competitive homegrown firms, and to have Singaporeans working together to build their ideal home. He also emphasised the party's desire for an accountable democracy.

He noted that many Singaporeans now enjoyed a good life, but that some still faced difficulties, despite their best efforts to improve their situations. He argued for a need to understand them without judgement and find ways to help. In his view, the collective happiness, prosperity and progress of the nation depends on all Singaporeans having a share in the country's success.

Mr Giam went on to observe that meritocracy was often seen as a guiding principle for Singapore, despite not being in the national pledge or anthem. While he acknowledged that

meritocracy was a good concept for combating issues like corruption and nepotism, he argued that it would lead to sub-optimal outcomes if everyone was only seen through the lens of ability and achievements. He elaborated on how we should not be content with only providing equal opportunities, as not everyone might be able to take advantage of such opportunities due to various complex factors working against them. He emphasised how Singapore is a nation, not a corporation, and that “we are each our brother’s keeper”, needing to work together and help each other to reach our goals.

Additionally, he argued that when addressing complex issues, solutions require contributions from all stakeholders, not just the government, academia, civil society or political parties. He described how all stakeholders, including the government, would need to listen, explain their points of view, and adjust their positions when necessary.

When asked by Dr Koh how an accountable democracy could be achieved, Mr Giam stated how each actor, be it political party or individual, must have a sense of responsibility and a desire for what is best for the country — and that if everyone shares this mindset, there will be no limit to what can be achieved in having an accountable democracy and progress for Singapore.

Opening Statement by Ms Hazel Poa

Ms Poa spoke about how politics also contribute to shaping Singapore’s soul, the direction in which she believed Singapore’s politics is headed, and her hopes for the future of Singapore’s political landscape.

She argued that politics cut across all sectors of the community, require collective action, and form the face that is represented to the world. Ms Poa described how choices made as a nation define the country’s soul and help to show its values to the rest of the world.

On the development of Singapore’s politics, Ms Poa noted that there have been changes in how politics are discussed. For example, from her experiences campaigning in two general elections, she observed that the fear of the potential consequences of voting for opposition parties has decreased significantly. However, she noted that the fear of running for opposition parties, such as the fear of impact on job prospects and job security, are still very much alive. People should not have to be worried about being open about their stance and speaking openly about their views, she said, as being unable to do so impacts the soul of the nation.

Ms Poa also described how the voters have been the drivers of political change, pointing to the 2020 General Election, where voters expressed their interest in having a greater diversity of viewpoints in parliament, voting 10 opposition candidates as members of parliament. She argued that the desire for change expressed through people’s votes have caused other developments to be set into motion, such a new position of Leader of the Opposition and more events inviting opposition members to speak and share their perspectives.

Concluding, Ms Poa stated her dream that powers will be more evenly distributed someday, and that future generations will be able to participate actively without fear in all discussions relating to their lives.

Discussion and Q&A

During the Q&A portion of the session, the speakers discussed a range of topics, including meritocracy, where the government should play a larger or smaller role, the idea of a multi-party system, and whether Singapore was ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

Meritocracy

There was general consensus that meritocracy was not a perfect tool, and that it, like other tools, was in need of continual refinement to reach the most ideal outcomes. The speakers also agreed there had to be a shift away from a focus on excellence in the form of grades and paper qualifications.

Mr Giam described how meritocracy was important as a guiding principle, especially for tackling issues such as corruption, but that it should not be taken to the extreme. He noted efforts from the government to move away from a sole focus on academic excellence, but that it was still a work-in-progress. There was a need to work together as a nation to determine what is very important. He identified the need to track outcomes to ensure that people were given opportunities, that hurdles were cleared in their paths to pursue their dreams, and that everyone, political parties and individuals, worked together to find the best way forward.

Ms Poa agreed that there was a need to place less emphasis on grades and paper qualifications, recognising achievements in skills as well. Meanwhile, Dr Puthucheariy emphasised that it was never the intention to have an absolute meritocracy, and agreed that like many tools, there was a need for continual refinement.

Potential for a non-Chinese prime minister

The speakers were also asked whether they believed Singapore could have a non-Chinese Prime Minister. Dr Puthucheariy noted that, despite wishing it were not the case, race still matters in Singapore, and expressed his hope that racial harmony will progress to the point where discussions about having a non-Chinese Prime Minister will be more about finding a high-quality candidate than having an icon for a “reset”. Meanwhile, Ms Poa commented that one view would be that Singapore was in fact ready for a non-Chinese prime minister, and that it was the PAP that might not be ready. Mr Giam described how, based on conversations with many Singaporeans, he did not really see any view expressing they were not ready for a candidate who is capable and honest. He noted that the choice in prime minister is really the decision of the political party, and that a party choosing a non-Chinese member, as its leader would depend on that party’s own internal calculations.

Government intervention

On the role of the government in different domains, the speakers all agreed that there were some clear areas in which the state should take a greater role, such as healthcare, economy, defence, and that there were areas where there could be more ground-up participation. Dr Puthucheariy noted that for all areas, there was a need for partnership between government and citizens, and that the government was doing this through grants, talks and challenges. Meanwhile, Mr Giam and Ms Poa argued that there were also areas in which the government

should take a step back more and let the people resolve issues and make decisions independently.

Potential of a multi-party system

The speakers were also asked about the potential of a multi-party system, whether it would cause more division, and whether there was enough talent in Singapore for two parties. Dr Puthuchery responded by saying that the equilibrium of parties would be determined by the people. However, he said there was still a need for each party and candidate to remain competitive and work to be the best, rather than intentionally trying to weaken their own offering to force a balance of representation from different parties.

To Mr Giam, whether or not there would be division in a multi-party system would depend on each political party and political candidate. Mr Giam also noted that having representation from multiple parties did not necessarily mean that things would balance out, as there were good and bad parties. He described the need for citizens to have all the information required to best determine which parties would help take the country forward in a united manner.

Ms Poa said the nature of politics in Singapore would be defined by the people. She noted how in spite of the increased representation in parliament, there had been no increase in divisiveness, so people should keep an open mind and continue to evolve this model. She also noted that in the past, when the path forward was clearer, having a one-party system was more efficient, allowing for quicker progress, decision-making and implementation. However, when faced with choices that are more complex, she argued that it might be risky to continue the one-party system.

Overall, the discussion produced an engaging conversation about the developments in Singapore's political landscape, with each of the three political party representatives sharing their unique insights and perspectives. Despite some differences in outlook, the conversation saw a sense of shared purpose, a willingness to collaborate for the best outcomes, and a focus on the needs of all Singaporeans.

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