

## Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth Youth & Politics

By Ann Mak

Singapore Perspectives seeks to engage Singaporeans in a vibrant debate over the policy challenges faced by the country. The theme of this year's conference is "Youth". The conference examined how the youths of today will adapt and fit into a society that is undergoing unprecedented change on multiple fronts — such as demographic, technological and socio-economic.

The panel, titled "Youth & Politics", featured Dr Elvin Ong, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science in the National University of Singapore (NUS); Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, Fellow at Residential College 4 of NUS; and Mr Ng Soon Kiat, Associate News Editor at *Lianhe Zaobao*, SPH Media Trust. They shared their insights into the political attitudes and involvement of youths in Singapore, and its implications for our current political system and society. This session was facilitated by Dr Teo Kay Key, Research Fellow at Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The "politics" pre-panel video showed the views of respondents from different political and civil society organisations. The respondents noted how young people are politically aware of developments both domestically and internationally. They also spoke on the moves towards representation and political pluralism within and across political parties, and expressed a range of opinions regarding this as well as the idea of lowering the voting age. Climate change and cost of living were among the two issues mentioned by respondents.



*Caption for photo: Discussion among (from left to right) Mr Ng Soon Kiat, Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, Dr Elvin Ong and Dr Teo Kay Key during Panel 6 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2024 Conference.*

### **A Quantitative Analysis of the Political Attitudes and Satisfaction of Youths**

Dr Elvin Ong drew on quantitative data comparing the views of youths and non-youths across two topics: their political attitudes towards “pluralism”, and their satisfaction with the current political and electoral system. The data indicates that youths are not a homogeneous segment and that sometimes, one may find more differences within than between youth and non-youth segments. This, in turn, bears implications for the electoral reforms that can be considered.

To conduct his statistical analysis, Dr Ong compiled data from two surveys conducted in 2020, the World Values Survey and the IPS Post-Election Survey. Using six questions from the two surveys, Dr Ong sought to examine if there were any differences in the political attitudes and satisfaction of youths (aged 21 to 35) and non-youths (aged 36 and above). He also divided youths in three sub-groups: (i) those aged 21 to 25, (ii) those aged 26 to 30, and (iii) those aged 31 to 35. This enabled Dr Ong to further analyse if any sub-groups of youths differed in terms of their political attitudes and satisfaction, and to compare each individual sub-group against the non-youths.

The first question asked youths and non-youths to place their own political ideologies on a left-right scale. He found that youths on average perceived themselves as consistently more left-leaning compared to non-youths, with those aged 21 to 25 tending to be the most left-leaning compared to non-youths. However, Dr Ong also observed that as the age of the youth increases, the more they tended to converge in their political ideology towards the non-youths. As such, there was no difference in the political ideology of youths aged 31 to 35 and non-youths.

The second question looked at the extent to which youths and non-youths think that the political system allows people like themselves to have a say in what the government does. Dr Ong found that youths on average felt that they had less say in what the government did as compared to non-youths. This difference was driven by the youngest youths, aged 21 to 25.

In contrast, the youths aged 26 to 30, as well as those aged 31 to 35, did not differ from non-youths in terms of their perceived say in what the government does.

In the third question, youths and non-youths were asked about their level of satisfaction with the functioning of the political system in Singapore. Dr Ong found that youths on average were less satisfied with the political system's current functioning as compared to non-youths, and this lower level of satisfaction was consistently observed across all three sub-groups of youths.

The fourth question asked youths and non-youths whether they agree that Singapore's election system is fair to all political parties. Again, Dr Ong found that youths on average tended to agree less that the election system is fair to all political parties compared to non-youths. However, this difference was no longer observed when demographic controls such as gender, race and household income were included in the analysis.

Next, youths and non-youths were asked if they agree that there is no need to change the election system in Singapore. Youths on average were more likely to disagree that there is no need to change the election system, and this was primarily driven by younger youths between the ages of 21 and 30.

The last question asked youths whether they agree that it is always important to have elected opposition in parliament. Again, Dr Ong found that youths on average were also more likely to agree that it is always important to have elected opposition. However, unlike the previous findings, this effect was instead driven by the older youths between the ages of 26 and 30.

### **Implications for Electoral Reform**

Based on his findings from the two surveys, Dr Ong concluded that there were persistent differences in the political attitudes and satisfaction of youths and non-youths. There also appeared to be differences among the youths themselves, whereby those aged 21 to 25 were the most left-leaning and unsatisfied, those aged 26 to 30 were moderately left-leaning and unsatisfied, and those aged 31 to 35 were the least left-leaning and unsatisfied.

There are several possible reasons for these findings, which in turn, have different policy implications. First, Dr Ong proposed that the findings may reflect the so-called naivety of youths, whereby their political attitudes and satisfaction will gradually shift as they accrue more life experience. This would imply that the government does not need to take action, as youth's sentiments will naturally shift overtime.

Another possibility Dr Ong raised was that youths may be dissatisfied with the government's lack of attention and substantive reform to issues that they care about, such as climate change, mental health and the treatment of migrant workers. However, given that the government has made some progress in these areas over the recent years, one would expect youth satisfaction to increase over the subsequent years should this reason hold true.

Dr Ong also suggested that youths may feel under-represented in Singaporean politics. As an ageing society, youths in Singapore constitute a smaller proportion of the voting electorate, hence having less influence over the outcome of local elections. They may also feel that there are few youthful politicians who adequately represent their interests. As such, it may be

beneficial to lower the voting age, to expand the proportion of youths in the voting electorate. Alternatively, increasing the number of Members of Parliament (MPs) may enable youths to be better represented, by decreasing the number of constituents per MP.

Lastly, Dr Ong shared that youths may also feel misrepresented in Singaporean politics. Due to the electoral system, the percentage of votes that opposition parties obtained is disproportionate to the number of seats in parliament that they actually hold. AS youth have been found to be more likely to vote for opposition parties, electoral reforms can be considered to reduce the disproportionality and mistranslation of votes, to enhance youth political satisfaction.

#### **Four Key Considerations for Youth and Politics in Singapore**

The second panellist, Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, raised four key points for consideration when it comes to youths and politics in Singapore: (i) youth diversity, (ii) youth centrality, (iii) youth engagement and (iv) youth empowerment.

On diversity, Dr Mustafa highlighted that youths in Singapore were not a monolithic demographic, that they differ from one another in terms of their views, interests, values and preferences. He said such diversity is healthy for Singapore politics, particularly policymaking, and hence should be both recognised and celebrated.

The second point he raised was on youth centrality in Singaporean politics, which encompasses two different aspects. The first involves domestic policies, which specifically impact youths, and the second is youths' involvement in political issues through institutions and organisations, for example, being part of various political parties in Singapore or being involved in an unstructured manner. Based on existing trends, particularly with the rise of social media platforms, Dr Mustafa predicts that Singaporean youths will increasingly gravitate towards informal networks that focus on socio-political issues to champion causes that matter to them, rather than gravitate towards established organisations. He also shared his observation of the increasing proclivity among youths to adopt a global consciousness over a national one, or to have a symbiotic intersection between the two types of consciousness. This suggests that Singaporean youths are more likely to view national issues, such as climate change, social justice and sustainable development, through a global lens.

The third consideration Dr Mustafa mentioned is youth engagement. He highlighted the importance of "youth-ening" the social compact in Singapore, which refers to the implicit agreement or social contract between the government and its population in terms of each other's roles and responsibilities. To refresh the social compact by placing youths as its focal point, it is necessary for the government to engage and collaborate with youths, rather than adopt a top-down approach. Allowing youths to ask questions and express their political inquisitiveness will provide for more robust and meaningful political engagements. To encourage youths to be more politically engaged, it is important to involve them in contemporary socio-political issues that they can better relate to, as compared to historical issues which youths may feel disconnected from. Youth political engagement must also leverage upon digital technologies, such as social media platforms, which are a key source of information for youths.

Lastly, Dr Mustafa highlighted that for youth politics to be effective and sustainable, they must be empowered to engage in politics and to feel that they have a stake in their future. This may be achieved by lowering the voting age in Singapore. However, before coming to such a decision, studies and consultations must first be undertaken to gauge the appetite for lowering the voting age. It is also important to consider what lowering the voting age should entail. For instance, at what specific age should it be lowered to? Should voting be made mandatory for those aged 21 and above, but optional for those below it? If a strong proclivity towards lowering the voting age in Singapore is observed, it may be beneficial to incorporate political education as part of the curriculum in schools. Dr Mustafa believed that lowering the voting age in Singapore can help to strengthen social cohesion, deepen political communication, enhance good governance, and potentially bridge the perceived intergenerational divide on various socio-political issues.

### **Trust Between Youths and the Government**

The final speaker, Mr Ng Soon Kiat, highlighted the importance of trust between the government and youths in Singapore. Specifically, he pointed out that there are three different aspects of trust that are relevant to the relationship between the government and youths: trust when it comes to participation, representation and the voting age in Singapore.

The first aspect that Mr Ng examined was trust when it comes to youth political participation. This refers to the extent to which the government trusts the quality of ideas put forth by youths, and whether youths themselves trust the government to listen and act upon their suggestions. Mr Ng pointed out the widespread perception among youths that government engagements with them are performative rather than substantive, which undermines their trust in the government's genuine receptiveness to their views. Youths feel consulted but not heard, which deters them or other youths from participating in future engagements.

To strengthen the trust between youths and the government, Mr Ng highlighted the need to calibrate youths' expectations and educate them about the policymaking process in Singapore. As policymaking is typically a tedious process that involves many stakeholders, it is often difficult for youths involved in government engagements to see the direct impact of their input on policy outcomes. Moreover, youth's trust in the government may also be eroded when they expect their feedback from thin engagements to have the impact of a thick engagement. Thin engagements involve low-effort, large-scale groups that signal broad support, like the signing of online petitions, whereas thick engagements require deep involvement by small groups to work on complex issues for clear policy outcomes, such as youth panels.

Besides calibrating youth's expectation, Mr Ng also emphasised the need for the government to remove barriers to entry, particularly psychological ones, and enhance channels for youth participation. This can be done by ensuring that there are sufficient access points for youths to step forward, as well as promoting a more inclusive recruitment of youth participants for government engagements.

The next aspect that Mr Ng raised was trust when it comes to the representation of youths in Singapore's political system. This refers to whether the government trusts that Singaporean youths will maintain and grow the current political system which, in its view, has been effective

for Singapore, and conversely, the extent of youths' trust in the government to represent them, and understand their lived experience and concerns. Mr Ng acknowledged the value of having politicians that represent the diverse social groups in Singapore, such as the LGBTQ community. However, he also cautioned youths against expecting "someone who looks like you to hold similar views as you, and to stand up for you", as such shorthand but superficial expectations may not align with reality and undersell the complexity of large groups.

Mr Ng suggested that political parties can improve trust by consistently putting out their positions on various issues, and regularly communicating their values. This has been the case for some MPs, who regularly speak up for groups such as people with special needs, migrant workers and low-income families. Doing so will enable youths to identify those that they feel share the same values and lived experiences as these groups, and enhance their sense of connection with their representatives.

The last aspect that Mr Ng shared was trust when it comes to the voting age in Singapore. This refers to whether or not the government trusts younger youths, such as those aged 18, to not be emotional and behave as short-term, single-issue voters, and whether youths trust the government to plan in their best interest. In Mr Ng's opinion, voting age is a red herring and should be considered within the broader context of political maturity in Singapore. While specific definitions of political maturity may defer, they generally refer to an electorate that is not emotional, not short-term and not myopic. These are also the same negative traits that are sometimes ascribed to youths, such as being "YOLO" or a "strawberry generation".

Nonetheless, Mr Ng emphasised that political maturity can be cultivated among Singaporean youths. This can be achieved through the communication of facts about Singapore's political system, and also helping youths to understand the trade-offs inherent in policymaking. For example, what sacrifices may be required in order to mitigate the impact of climate change. Such a political education should be provided before the age of 18 should the voting age be lowered in Singapore. For instance, students could watch parliamentary proceedings in class, so that they can be directly exposed to how their representatives convey their positions in parliament. Another suggestion Mr Ng put forth is to encourage more youths to participate in online discussions on key issues or topics. These online discussions can be facilitated by youth content creators, in collaboration with youth organisations.

### Question-and-Answer Session

**Q:** Given all you have seen and observed so far in your work on politics in Singapore, do you think that there is any difference in what youths want in politicians and policies, as compared to the generations above them? And do these differences, if any, matter?

**A:** Mr Ng shared his observations from a youth-facing platform by SPH Media Trust called "HeyKaki", which targets Singaporean youths aged 18 to 25. Based on the panels convened to see which topics these youths are more interested in, Mr Ng said that youths generally shared the same concerns as non-youths. For instance, they were especially concerned about the cost of living, housing affordability, financial security and relationship problems. Similarly, Dr Ong agreed that what youths and non-youths wanted were not necessarily different, in terms of policies and a government that is effective. However, youths and non-youths may

differ in terms of how salient specific issues are for them, as well as their willingness to make trade-offs. For instance, climate change may be of greater concern to youths, and hence, they may be more willing to make trade-offs such as paying for a plastic bag as compared to non-youths. Dr Mustafa also noted that some issues cut across generations, though each generation may interpret or respond to those issues differently.

**Q:** There seems to be an increasing desire for more checks and balances in Singapore's legislative body, such as having a more diverse representation of Singaporeans in parliament. How can we strike a balance between having checks and balances in Singapore's political system and maintaining political stability and efficiency, which is often correlated to homogeneity in Singapore's parliament?

**A:** Dr Ong shared his view that focusing on such a dilemma is not always productive, and that having greater checks and balances in Singapore's legislative body is not necessarily at odds with political stability. To illustrate his point, Dr Ong gave the hypothetical example of a future election where the People's Action Party (PAP) does not obtain the majority of seats in parliament. Such a situation may not necessarily result in political instability. As for Dr Mustafa, he said there are different ways of having checks and balances. While there are checks and balances inherent in parliament, they can also arise outside of parliament, such as having political discussions on social media. He also encouraged youths to make their vote count, by supporting politicians that align with their views, values and aspirations, to promote the change that they wish to see in Singapore's political system. Lastly, Mr Ng suggested that the growing calls for more checks and balances may be the result of Singaporeans not seeing a diversity of views within the ruling party. There needs to be a vibrant exchange of ideas within the PAP that is made apparent to the public, in order to increase Singaporeans' satisfaction with the ruling party, he added.

**Q:** How can local schools' curriculum and policy be changed to educate youths about global politics and facilitate activism? Is the government prepared to handle more politically active youths?

**A:** Dr Ong answered that any curriculum that educates students about the basic structure and functioning of Singapore's political system, and also allows them to make sense of comparative political systems, would enhance Singaporean youth's political maturity. For Dr Mustafa, the government should not regard more politically active youths as a negative development. This is because the more that Singaporean youths are invested in their local politics, the more they feel that they have a stake in their country. Mr Ng also raised several concerns regarding the mandating of political education in the education system, such as political education being used as a political tool to promote one party's interests and agenda.

**Q:** Young Singaporeans enlist to National Service (NS) when they are around the age of 18. Assuming that they are eligible to vote, do you think that NS would affect their political exposure and ability to make rational decisions when voting?

**A:** While Dr Mustafa said NS provides Singaporean youths with experiences that bring them to a level of maturity when they consume information, whether or not NS influences their political engagement depends on their individual interests. As for Dr Ong, he believed that

being able to vote while undergoing NS would likely be beneficial. This is because NS can help to instil a greater sense of regard for one's country and countrymen, which may lead to youths making more carefully considered decisions when voting during elections. Mr Ng noted that undergoing NS does not mean that youths are not attuned to local developments, due to the widespread use of social media among them. As such, youths going through NS can also make well-informed voting decisions.

**Q:** Recent findings from Gallup show that while young women are becoming more progressive, young men are becoming more conservative. Do you see this kind of gender divergence in Singapore as well?

**A:** According to Dr Ong, one possible reason for these findings is that young men feel threatened by the increased competition in the labour market caused by the entry of well-educated women. He believed that because Singapore has generated sufficient jobs for both women and men who graduate from different institutions, such a gender divergence may not be taking place in Singapore. However, Dr Ong also said further research and data analysis would be required before he can provide a more definite and comprehensive answer.

**Q:** We know that youths are not politically or ideologically monolithic. How then would you guard against political or ideological polarisation among youths as they become more politically aware and active, and how do you prevent an us-versus-them mentality from taking root?

**A:** Dr Mustafa said one way would be to provide youths with education, such that they consume the right kind of political information, and possibly introducing political mentorship. He also highlighted that polarisation, which implies a diversity of views, is not inherently detrimental, and its impact depends mainly on the intended aims of polarisation. Dr Ong observed that research suggests that polarisation tends to arise due to the deliberate efforts by politicians and political parties to polarise the electorate for their political advantage. As such, he emphasised the need for political leaders and parties to be centrist, and to promote ideologies that are as inclusive as possible. Finally, Mr Ng suggested that the government can work with online content creators, which are one of the primary avenues that youths turn to for learning about social issues, to create safe spaces for youths to express their views.

**Q:** Is the perception of political apathy among youths due to forbiddance of political activism, and how can youths speak up when they are clearly penalised in intangible ways?

**A:** Both Dr Ong and Dr Mustafa agreed that some youths in Singaporeans choose to be politically apathetic, which is not an inherently negative choice and should be respected. However, for Dr Mustafa, it becomes concerning when there is a growing number of Singaporean youths who choose political apathy because they feel disempowered. If that is the case, it is important to examine the causes for their sense of disempowerment, to take an appropriate course of action. As for Mr Ng, he said that there are numerous avenues by which youths can provide the government with their ideas and feedback, such as the newly introduced platform called CrowdTaskSG. Mr Ng encouraged youths to participate in such initiatives more actively, so that their voices can be heard.



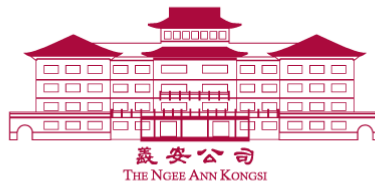
**Q:** Mr Ng mentioned creating safe spaces online for youths to discuss politics. So how exactly can we create platforms for constructive debates on politics? Should we encourage such controversial discussions in the first place?

**A:** Mr Ng said content creators have an important role in holding court, managing the exchange of ideas among their followers, and intervening when someone flouts the rules of engagement within discussions. Content creators can play a more active role in ensuring that their followers are operating within a close, intimate, yet safe online space whenever they have political discussions.

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