A new political culture is emerging

These are edited excerpts of a lecture and question-and-answer session held virtually with Professor Chan Heng Chee on Wednesday. Prof Chan is an S R Nathan fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies. The session was moderated by Mr Bilahari Kausikan, chairman of the Middle East Institute.

Chan Heng Chee
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General Election 2020 is over.

The PAP (People's Action Party) Government has been returned to office with 61.2 per cent of the vote and 83 of the 93 seats. The Workers' Party now holds two GRCs (group representation constituencies) and a single-member constituency, 10 seats in all, and for the first time since independence, Singapore has a Leader of the Opposition in Parliament.

This is a historic watershed. The election demonstrated that the electorate chose safety, security and solutions by returning the incumbent PAP, but at the same time wanted to strengthen opposition voices and checks and balances in the legislature.

The electoral result was a vote on the last five years, the last five months and the last nine days.

The last five years: Voters were looking at PAP predominance or the "super majority" and how governance and parliamentary debate had been conducted. They did not approve of the way the elected president was introduced and other policies as well, like Pofma (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act).

The last five months. The vote was also on how the Covid pandemic was handled, with the lack of clarity and micromanaging of rules and protocols for businesses. There were also growing fears and anxieties about jobs. And in the last nine days of the campaign, it was about messaging, communicating and the online presence and savviness of the parties.

Which brings me to an important fact and trend in our society. We talk a great deal about the youth vote and younger voters.

What has not been highlighted in the commentaries is that GE2020 occurs at a time when Singapore is at its youth peak.

The biggest youth bulge is aged between 25 and 35, and if you include those in the age group 20 to 24, it is a huge group. The Workers' Party understood this and chose youthful candidates and issues for the Zoomer generation who prefer personal narratives and "I feel your pain" connectivity, approachability and authenticity. This online digital politics is now the new retail politics. Up close and personal.

Clearly, this age group bought the opposition message of the need for diverse voices in Parliament and the need for checks and balances.

The question is: As this demographic group grows older, will their values and issues change? It has been conventional wisdom that as people get older, they become more conservative,

but a Pew Research report suggests American millennials and Gen Xers are different from boomers and the silent older generation.

They buck the trend of changing, and on many issues, they have a distinct and increasingly liberal outlook. So I expect our millennials will continue to support diverse voices and an opposition in Parliament as a good thing even as they age. They will have specific personal concerns too in different phases of their lives. The incumbent party will have to understand this group better to win back their vote.

During the campaign and in the post-GE analysis, the word that comes up in most conversations is "fair". There is a strong desire to see the incumbents play politics more fairly when dealing with the opposition. I have been thinking about the evolving political culture of Singapore for some time now. As I listen to panellists and read the online posts, it is evident that a new political culture is emerging.

On the one hand is the culture of government which emphasises strong government, effectiveness, a legalistic culture, delivery of public goods and services, and a better life for the people. Critics have characterised the PAP political style as paternalistic. On the other hand, many Singaporeans invoke democracy and want to see Singapore evolve into a full-fledged democracy.

Yet, political commentators have asked why the PAP is asking for a strong mandate, and why they are not more magnanimous in the treatment of opponents. They would like to see rules applied to all political participants fairly, that gerrymandering be restrained.

A kinder, gentler politics

It strikes me that even as we yearn for democratic competition, competitive politics, we are asking for a kinder and gentler politics. We seem to be repulsed by the competitive mean politics of some Western democracies.

Educated and younger Singaporeans do not want to see political overkill when the Government deals with political opponents. This may be the result of the decades-long predominance of the ruling party in Parliament and in government that, as politics matures and evolves, these are the values and norms that have come to be shared by the society and community. This is who we are.

Consequently, the political tools in the toolbox that worked in the past may not be acceptable or as effective going forward. Prime Minister Lee (Hsien Loong) was seen by many as gracious and honest in his reaction to the election results, and his reaching out to the Workers' Party leader Pritam Singh was applauded.

Post-election, the PAP as a party would seek to understand the messages voters were sending in the results and as (Law and Home Affairs) Minister Shanmugam said: "It requires a lot of soul-searching and reflection." I believe we will see changes. The tone post-election was a unifying one.

BK: I've received a number of questions which have been submitted through Facebook. What is the greatest challenge for Singapore in uniting our people post-this election? Are we getting more tolerant as the politics gets more complicated? How do we avoid this kind of polarisation,

and do you think that it is certain that a multiparty or at least a bi-party system is going to evolve in Singapore?

CHC: There is a developing political culture in Singapore that wants a kinder, gentler politics.I do not think Singaporeans want to imitate the very divisive and mean politics of the democracies of the West even when they want democracy. So that's a good start.

Nature of competitive politics

But in competitive politics, as you get more competitive, willy-nilly, you will become more polarised. That's a reality.

When I hear younger people say, "Why should the PAP ask for a strong mandate?" Have you ever seen a political party going for elections in a democracy saying, "Give me a weak mandate"?

It comes with the turf. Democracies need some of that. Just because 10 opposition members were voted in and the opposition party had a better vote, it doesn't mean Singapore is divided. Please do not portray us that way. We are just maturing and it's been a healthy expression of views, and messages are being sent. I do not think we are at the point of being disunited or being too divisive.

And how do you unify the group? Well, you can't truly unify because those who voted for the opposition and are committed Workers' Party or PSP (Progress Singapore Party) members or SDP (Singapore Democratic Party), whatever, will feel that way, and the committed PAP members will feel very strongly PAP. That's the way politics is; it's in every other country, but you don't consider that divisive politics. Each one now has chosen a side to back.

Does liberalism lead to intolerance? You can be too politically correct with liberalism, and that's intolerant, and I've seen that on some campuses in the West and I think that's not healthy. That's liberalism gone a bit funny. But liberalism should not lead to greater intolerance of divergent views. But people get so excited or so convinced that they are right in their liberal view that they can be illiberal towards those who do not share their liberal view. So yes, that's something we have to look out for. Maybe I'm optimistic but I really don't think that's our problem.

Is a multiparty system good for Singapore? We will have a multiparty system. Frankly, the two-party system is an aberration that only the United States and Britain have, and occasionally the Liberal Party pops up. Most other democracies have many parties.

BK: How do we educate our young so as to live in this more complex political environment so that the inevitable political disagreements do not get out of hand?

CHC: How do you avoid group polarisation? We can only keep producing more opportunities for a class of multi-ethnicities, multi-races to be together - it's exposure to it and how do we keep organising that. I am very glad that in recent years we have become more and more aware of multi-ethnicities, although we have to improve still on tolerance. Not everyone has the same tolerance or think of different ethnicities other than their own in the same positive way, and that we've got to try to change.

Digital silos

The problem is, in this digital world, we are all just going into the websites and the chat groups of maybe our own kind, our own values, our own politics. So we are quite "siloed".

And how do you break through those silos which are building up with technology and the digital world? I think it's a very serious question. It's a whole bunch of actions, not just one action. It has to happen in school, it has to happen in the social space. And I'm always very aware of ensuring that we have diversity when we hire, when we have a party, when we have speakers on a platform, but I can't say everyone shares the same kind of reflex.

I remember walking into an event on an American campus organised by Singapore and I walked in and I looked. I said: "Why are there so few minorities here?" The organiser did not think of it; they just allowed everybody to register and did not go out of the way to make sure that there was a broad representation. So the point is, be aware of it, work for it, increase the social spaces for engagement, and you hope with time we learn.

I like to think of younger people as more liberal, more multi-ethnic, inter-ethnic, but there is also a number of younger people that live in their own separate siloed worlds.

Good governance

BK: Are Singaporeans being too critical of good governance or maybe insufficiently appreciative of good governance? To what extent did the "flight to safety" mechanism fail because of the PAP's real or perceived failings in handling Covid? In other words, is good governance underrated now or not enough?

CHC: A short and easy answer is that we have taken good governance for granted, because we've had good governance all the time. The one way to know it is when you travel out of Singapore. I am constantly being told in the United States what a wonderful government we have and we wish we could have your government, etc. In Singapore, Singaporeans are very critical of the Government, and they point to all the little pockmarks on the face. I think we just got used to good governance and we take good governance for granted. And I think we should try to appreciate that. Of course, the best lesson is when you start having bad governance, but I hope we never get to that point.

The values that are being emphasised, even by some of the opposition parties, show they understand what good governance entails. The fact that the Workers' Party is very much a moderate party and like the PAP; they don't want to differ too much, which means they understand what are the values at stake and what a large proportion of Singaporeans value, and that must include all the principles that make up good governance.

But, we should not see an election like this as a rejection of good governance either. It's an election where grievances were there, people were losing jobs and their businesses were in trouble, so all these are specific reasons at a particular election.

Also, many people believe the PAP would win anyway. All of us know we received all those bookie announcements - I saw a couple which said the PAP would sweep everything, and there were other bookie announcements where they said that the opposition will sweep everything. So there's a lot of disinformation being circulated pre-election.

But I think Singaporeans knew they would have the PAP in government, so you are assured of safety and incumbency of the incumbents. But they do yearn to have an opposition voice in Parliament, and I think the results show that, and younger Singaporeans show that they value this.

Now I would say that, frankly, if the PAP were ever in a position where the seats in Parliament become - like you have 83 (PAP) seats now, let's say, if it gets to about 30 opposition seats in Parliament, people will think very carefully when they vote.

If the opposition parties come up to expectations, well, people will say, "Let's see". But if the performance is not good, there will be the feeling about what the PAP offered as good governance, (which) would also be appreciated again. But then the PAP could also get complacent and not attend to what they have attended to in the past... and they would be also in some tight spot.

Will Singapore be bypassed?

BK: Okay, a cluster of questions on globalisation. I'm going to try to summarise them.

With globalisation, do you think the nation state would endure? Related to that is, there seems to be a lack of global leadership right now. When any major political power takes an initiative, it is opposed by some other major power or it appears that way. And, historically Singapore's geographic location was a crucial factor. Is that still going to be a crucial factor, going forward?

CHC: I'll take the last question first. Is it the location that has helped us? Singapore is a global city. Will we be bypassed?

People who read and analyse global cities will point out that if a global city such as Singapore develops a number of activities, and you agglomerate activities, and you specialise and they all become so inevitable that you are the go-to place to be, you keep your position, and people will make a stop because you are the place to be.

If we think of it that way, Singapore has agglomerated its activities very well, no matter whether it is shipping, communications, oil, banking - you have a whole slew of ancillary activities around an industry that builds up the importance of that industry. Now that will make it hard to shift things off.

Will our location ever be, in fact, irrelevant? Will we be made irrelevant?

That's a question that's always asked. And I have told many people overseas - do you know the Singapore Cabinet, in fact, must be the only Cabinet in the world that read A History Of Venice (by John Julius Norwich), this big thick book, in the 80s or 90s? Because what happened to Venice could happen to us and you can be made irrelevant.

So we must always find out what is the important trend, what is the important technological development so that you are not blindsided. I think that's what Singapore has to do. That's what the PAP Government has been doing - how not to be blindsided, how to anticipate what is happening.

But you never know. Honolulu was bypassed when the size of aeroplanes changed and you don't have to stop in Honolulu any more. So in Singapore, we must always find out what

technology can render us obsolete, but also what will come up instead, the new wave of economic activities and using different kinds of technology.

So, maybe in the future, it is not location, location and location, but we could have location as the digital hub, and that's a different kind of location.

Global leadership

Lack of global leadership: Yes, there's a lack of global leadership and it's very difficult to govern well today, because the world has gone so complex.

We always look back to World War II, which produced all your giants or we thought they were giants. Now they want to pull down Winston Churchill's statue, but Winston Churchill is considered a giant. Roosevelt. Even Stalin is a giant in the Soviet Union, but, of course, there are so many negatives there. But they were giants at a particular time in history. Today, the world is getting very complex, so that it is very hard to see giants stride across the stage.

We really have to come to grips with technology and how disruptive technology can be, and how technology can reshape society, so that it's hard for even those in government to try to connect with society.

And that's why I said that the disruption caused by technology is greater than the disruption caused by Covid-19.

So yes, there's a lack of global leadership, but (through) regional groupings, in regions, countries are trying to come together to make up for that deficit by offering regional leadership.

With globalisation, will the nation state endure? We first thought (with) globalisation, will we be one global community? We found that was not true.

With globalisation, there was greater turning inwards and an emphasis on localisation. When you are so global, you lose your identity, and you do not know where you belong. So, people yearn for their own distinctive identity in the country or in the tribe. That's the other face of globalisation - globalisation and localisation.

Will nation states endure and survive? I'm a political scientist. I believe in multilateralism, but I also think nation states will survive. You look at the projects of multilateralism. Europe - you find that the nation state is alive and well in Europe, but they also share certain common European projects together. But the nation state is, in fact, very strong.

And with this new politics, we talk of a resurgence of nationalism. It's not just in Asia that you see nationalism. America First is a new nationalism, and every country has a country first. So nationalism is alive and well.