

Are Singaporeans ready for a two-party system?

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Will Singapore have a flourishing two-party system in a decade? Three politicians whose parties are represented in Parliament today say it is not impossible.

But how Singapore's political system will ultimately evolve will depend on the electorate, they added.

Senior Minister of State Janil Puthuchery, Aljunied GRC MP Gerald Giam and Non-Constituency MP Hazel Poa were discussing what politics in Singapore will be like in 2030 at the Singapore Perspectives 2021 conference yesterday.

Dr Janil, who is with the ministries of Communications and Information, and Health, said whether Singapore ends up with a multi-party or two-party system that sees parties coming and going as if through a revolving door, as has happened around the world, will be decided by Singaporeans.

He was responding to former Nominated MP and actress Janice Koh, who had asked if the People's Action Party (PAP) still believes that a two-party system is not feasible, now that the Workers' Party (WP) has made more headway in the 2020 General Election by winning 10 parliamentary seats.

Dr Janil said: "I think it's about how people will vote and what are the proposals and offerings made by the parties. And the people of Singapore will make that decision about what they want as that equilibrium."

As for the PAP, its duty is to do its best for the people it seeks to represent, and this means it will try to be the best possible party and will compete for talent as hard as any other parties, added Dr Janil, who heads the PAP's youth wing.

He said: "I think your question is what will the PAP do to bring about that equilibrium... It would be unconscionable of us to say 'Let us weaken our offering deliberately, let us deliberately do badly by the system' in order to then achieve an outcome which may or may not be desirable by Singaporeans."

During the session moderated by Institute of Policy Studies deputy director of research Gillian Koh, the panellists were asked if a multi-party system could lead to a less effective government.

Tan Ean Kiam Foundation chairman Tan Keng Soon, citing the policy to make English the lingua franca of Singapore, suggested that the Government would be hard pressed to make such unpopular but ultimately beneficial decisions today as it could cost votes.

He said: "What we need is... a dominant party and a weak opposition to stick a needle in its back. I think that is the golden mean and I think we've already achieved that."

But Mr Giam said both the Government and the opposition may have to make such painful decisions, and responsible parties that act in the interest of the country will clearly explain policies and persuade the electorate.

He added that Singaporeans' support of unpopular policies in the country's early days could be due to their willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of Singapore's survival, and not because they were "muzzled" by the climate of fear under a one-party system.

Mr Giam, who heads the WP's policy research team, also said that Singapore need not go the way of democracies which have been torn apart by political tribalism.

He added that whether politics becomes more divisive hinges on the Government's willingness to accommodate opposing viewpoints, saying: "We in tiny Singapore have the opportunity to show the world a better way to respect each other and resolve our differences."

Echoing these views, Ms Poa from the Progress Singapore Party said: "We have been having more representation in Parliament, and I don't think there has been any increase in divisiveness."

She added that while a one-party system may have sped up Singapore's progress in the early days, it is now too risky to rely on just one party given the uncertainty ahead.

Another question the panellists were asked at the event, held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre and also streamed online, was whether a non-Chinese could be prime minister of Singapore.

Ms Poa said: "The only reason we are not ready is the PAP is not ready."

Mr Giam noted that the prime minister is elected by the party in power, and each party will have to make its own calculations on whether it wants to go into elections with a non-Chinese secretary-general. He said the WP had said yes to that when it elected Mr Pritam Singh as party chief in 2018, and has achieved a relative degree of electoral success.

He cited the WP's win in Aljunied GRC with three non-Chinese members on its slate - Mr Singh, Mr Leon Perera and Mr Faisal Manap - as well as two Chinese MPs of Peranakan descent - himself and Ms Sylvia Lim, who "don't speak Chinese very well".

"If race and language were such an important factor... we would have made sure we fielded a more Chinese slate. But we made our calculations that this was the suitable slate of candidates that would be able to serve residents of Aljunied GRC well, and that's why we chose that slate regardless of race," he added.

Dr Janil, meanwhile, noted that many surveys and studies show that race still matters to Singaporeans, though he wishes it was not so.

He said: "I do hope that our racial harmony progresses to the point where when people talk about a non-Chinese prime minister, it's not about an icon of resetting or an icon of re-imagining... but on the basis of that person's ability to do the job."

"And that will be for Singaporeans to decide."