

GE2020 shows a new political culture of a 'kinder and gentler politics' is emerging, says Chan Heng Chee

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SINGAPORE - The recent general election has made clear that a new political culture is emerging in Singapore, said Professor Chan Heng Chee on Wednesday (July 15).

The veteran diplomat noted how on one hand, the political style of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) emphasises strong government, effectiveness, a legalistic culture and the delivery of a better life for the people - which some have called paternalistic.

On the other hand, many citizens want to see Singapore evolve into a full-fledged democracy. Observers have also expressed a desire for rules to be applied to all political participants fairly, and for gerrymandering to be restrained, she noted.

"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," she said in a lecture livestreamed on Facebook.

Prof Chan, an Ambassador-at-Large with the Foreign Ministry, was delivering the last of three lectures as the Institute of Policy Studies' 7th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. Wednesday's lecture was titled "Singapore in a Time of Flux: Optimism from the Jaws of Gloom".

Giving her take on the results of the election, which saw the PAP win 83 of 93 seats and 61.24 per cent of the popular vote, down from 69.9 per cent in the 2015 election, Prof Chan noted that young people aged 25 to 35 make up one of the biggest groups in the population.

The Workers' Party (WP), which won an unprecedented 10 of the 93 seats and a second GRC, clearly understood this, choosing youthful candidates and issues that resonated with Generation Z voters, she added.

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

She also noted that while conventional wisdom says that people become more conservative as they get older, a Pew Research report suggests that American millennials and Generation Xers (those aged 35 to 49) are different from generations before them, including the baby boomers. They have a distinct and increasingly liberal outlook on many issues, she said.

"I expect our millennials will continue to support diverse voices and an opposition in Parliament as a good thing even as they age... The incumbent party will have to understand this group better to win back their vote," she added.

SINGAPORE'S CHANGING GOVERNANCE MODEL

Tracing the evolution of Singapore's political and governance model through the years, Prof Chan noted that a one-party Parliament prevailed from 1968, when the first general election since independence was held, till 1981, when then WP chief JB Jeyaretnam won the Anson by-election.

In the 13 years without opposition, the PAP government systematically depoliticised the political system, with politics shifting to the bureaucracy, she said.

From 1981, a repoliticisation of the administrative state took place, and in 2011, the desire for political change erupted with the convergence of several "deeply felt social and economic issues", such as growing inequality and the fast-increasing numbers of immigrants, said Prof Chan, who described this as the arrival of "populist politics" in Singapore.

The PAP subsequently managed to improve its popular vote share after introducing a slew of social and economic policies, and conducting a series of consultations in 2012 and 2013. But with GE2020, "we see a fully repoliticised Singapore", she added.

In her lecture, Prof Chan offered a few ideas on how Singapore's governance model can shift in the wake of the general election and amid a world that has been transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While opposition parties have increased in number, notwithstanding the limited operational room for them, there is also a "new mushrooming" of civil society organisations attracting young, educated and idealistic people, she noted.

"The recent Covid-19 pandemic shows that civil society organisations have a role to play as an early warning system for social issues and fissures in society... no matter how unwelcome the feedback," said Prof Chan. This includes issues such as the plight of abused women, the ageing poor, and foreign workers. The Government can work more closely with these organisations, as both have common goals, she suggested.

More room for expression must also be given to encourage Singaporeans, especially the young, to think innovatively. "We should seriously discourage groupthink," she said. "If our political model needs fixing, it is how to accommodate differences and diverse views in our institutions and our country."

There is also a need to keep chipping away at the issue of inequality in order to guard against the threat of populism returning to Singapore's politics, she added.

Critics have rightly pointed out that Singapore has high inequality compared to other developed economies, which have lower Gini coefficients, Prof Chan said.

But she noted that Singapore's income figures show "tentative change in the right direction", compared to the industrialised democracies of the United States and Europe where incomes have stagnated or decreased. In the past decade, median incomes here have risen by 32 per cent in real terms.

Singapore is fortunate that there are no ideologically conservative parties who argue against assisting the poor, added Prof Chan. "Rather, the debate is on why not give more, with the opposition pressing for bigger subsidies and giving to more groups," she said.

The Government's response during Covid-19 attests to its understanding of societal needs, said Prof Chan, who added that its work in addressing inequality is never done.

She noted that as the country becomes more affluent, what are considered basic needs for those at the bottom 20 per cent changes, and they will require more just to ensure their

situation does not become more dire. There is also the emergence of the squeezed middle class. "The goalposts change all the time, and so eliminating poverty is always a work in progress," she said.

WHAT GE2020 RESULTS MEAN FOR SINGAPORE

In the question-and-answer session following the lecture, Prof Chan said that while political systems will become more polarised as they see more competition, she does not think the election result indicates that Singapore is now divided. "We are just maturing, and it's been a healthy expression... of views."

She also said she does not think the election outcome represents a rejection of Singapore's model of good governance. "(It was) an election when grievances (due to Covid-19) were there, people were losing jobs, businesses were in trouble," she said.

Many voters also believed that the PAP would win the election, and were thus assured of the incumbency of the PAP government, though younger Singaporeans showed they yearned to have an opposition in Parliament, she added.

Asked if the group representation constituency (GRC) system should be relooked and replaced with single seats instead, Prof Chan said there is some merit to the GRC system, as it helps to ensure minority representation.

It has also proven to help not only the ruling party, but also the opposition to win several seats at one go, she said, citing the WP's wins in Aljunied and Sengkang GRCs. "I don't feel strongly about (the issue) of whether we keep GRCs or not," she said.

"The reason we had GRCs... so (that) we can ensure minority representation, was a good one. I don't see a reason to take it away."