

## Looking forward: The political scene - Public consultation; Dialogues to continue, but beware of fatigue

**Charissa Yong**

*The Straits Times*, 3 January 2016

National consultation exercises are not going the way of the dodo, with the ongoing SGfuture public dialogues scheduled to run till the middle of the year.

The challenge this year will be to ensure that the dialogues are an effective feedback mechanism and "not a talk shop", says National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

"As long as Singaporeans know and can see that the series isn't a 'wayang' exercise, they will be motivated to participate and be committed to the measures they believe are realistic and good for the country, the people and future generations," he adds.

But observers cautioned about dialogue fatigue setting in, especially since this is not the only major public feedback drive in recent years. While they welcome the exercises, they caution that the public's expectations must be managed.

"We cannot keep raising expectations of big changes and then disappointing Singaporeans," says former PAP MP Inderjit Singh. He adds that expectations must be set at the right levels.

After the heat of the hustings and last year's general election, politics looks to be one defined by how the Government manages the demands brought by an economy that is slowing down and in the midst of restructuring. Singaporeans will have ample opportunities to be part of the decision making process this year, as a number of consultative panels and committees seek inputs on issues ranging from how to memorialise Singapore's founders to the economy's future direction.

"If not, people will stop believing in such exercises and, in the very long term, it will discredit the Government," he says.

Unlike the Our Singapore Conversation in 2013, which gathered ideas on what Singaporeans would like Singapore to be in the next half century, the SGfuture dialogues focus on how to get there.

A key merit of the SGfuture dialogues is in how it encourages ordinary Singaporeans to play a part in charting the country's future, say observers.

Institute of Policy Studies senior fellow Gillian Koh says: "The future lies not in what the Government can do.

"It isn't the pathfinder forward if we are to move to the next level of development."

She adds: "What the Government can do is to convene meetings where the pathfinders across society spell out their inklings of where the future lies."