

Panellists discuss GE2020 survey, future of Singapore political system

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The results of the recent general election have led some to speculate that Singapore could be headed towards a two-party political system, but political observer Lam Peng Er thinks it is unlikely.

"We are more likely to see the emergence of a 1½ party system within the next decade or two," said the senior research fellow from the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, referring to Japan's party system between 1955 and 1993.

Speaking on a panel during an online forum yesterday organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on its post-election survey, Dr Lam said the dominant party in Japan during those years was the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The smaller Japan Socialist Party made up a "permanent opposition", consistently winning about half the number of seats held by the LDP.

It is conceivable, he said, that the Workers' Party (WP) in Singapore could become a prominent party in Parliament with a substantial number of seats, while not displacing the People's Action Party (PAP). Many voters here would welcome this scenario, he added.

Another panellist, independent scholar Derek da Cunha, said GE2020 showed that only a moderate opposition party that is not too confrontational can succeed in taking seats away from the PAP.

This has held true for three decades, he said, citing the relative success of the Singapore Democratic Party as a moderate party under its founder Chiam See Tong. The party later moved in a more confrontational direction, "destroying opposition chances for a generation", he added.

"(During GE2020), the WP referred to itself, as it did in GE2015, as rational, responsible and respectable. There is no fourth R; the WP has no radical agenda."

Dr da Cunha said the WP's electoral strategy has been effective, noting it concentrated its efforts in the east of Singapore and appealed to a broad spectrum of voters across different demographics.

Political science professor Chu Yun-han of the National Taiwan University shared findings from the Asian Barometer Survey, where he is director and principal investigator. The panellist said Singapore ranks higher than many of its neighbours in areas such as the proportion of citizens who see their country's political regime as legitimate, and who believe the country's political system is capable of solving the problems it faces.

He said Singaporeans and many of their Asian neighbours tend to view democracy in terms of whether a system delivers good governance and social equity, rather than features such as freedom and liberty.

The issue of fairness in policymaking and whether candidates were seen as being fair also emerged as a key concern, the survey found.

Dr Lam cited two events during the GE2020 campaign that reflected these concerns: One was the withdrawal of PAP candidate Ivan Lim following allegations of his elitist behaviour, which reflected fears of unequal treatment of elites and non-elites. Another was the police report made against the WP's Sengkang GRC candidate and eventual MP Raeesah Khan. He added that the system "must remain fair, and be seen as fair by the masses, to maintain national cohesion".

The survey found an uptick in respondents who said they were concerned with "post-material" issues like fairness and political pluralism.

However, Dr da Cunha said Singaporeans' paramount concerns continue to be material "bread and butter" issues like jobs and the cost of living. This was accentuated during the pandemic, he added.