

PAP in decline? But what if...

Han Fook Kwang

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What is it about Singapore that when people talk about its future, it is almost always about whether the ruling party will remain in power?

There was another round of crystal ball gazing recently over this evergreen question.

To be fair, the subject of Ho Kwon Ping's talk at the Institute of Policy Studies was on politics in the next 50 years, so he couldn't avoid the subject.

He spoke a few days after former foreign minister George Yeo related how social media and the information revolution had overturned traditional hierarchies, making governance more difficult, including in Singapore.

These talks have refuelled the question of how long the People's Action Party (PAP) can remain in power.

Ho sketched several scenarios on how the party's dominance would be challenged, and he thought it possible a two-party system could emerge in 15 years' time.

These discussions might seem odd to external observers when there isn't a successor to the ruling party in sight.

The closest, the Workers' Party, has openly declared it isn't ready to form the next government, though it might not be so diffident the next time it makes further electoral gains.

But, for now, we are left with speculating the longevity of the PAP in a political vacuum.

Perhaps it's more useful to turn the question on its head and ask: Under what circumstances can the PAP remain as dominant in the next 50 years as it has been in the past?

Critics of the government might recoil in horror at such a prospect.

But, seriously, it's a question worth asking. And since we are into speculative scenarios, I can think of at least three where the ruling party might continue to reign supreme.

Scenario 1: All change at the party

Most commentators, including Ho, who doubt the PAP's long-term ability to continue in power, have rightly identified the many challenges it faces.

One of the most difficult for the party is its loss of control of information because of the proliferation of social media.

Singapore society is also much more diverse and fragmented today.

Many divisions have grown - liberal versus conservative, gay versus straight, local versus foreign - making it difficult for any party to represent the broad middle ground.

On the economic front, the fruits of growth are not as evenly distributed as before, and even the growth itself isn't a given.

But, ultimately, it is the party's response to these challenges that will determine if it will be able to continue winning the mandate to govern.

Its ability to meet these challenges is increasingly being questioned as it grapples with complex issues on many policy fronts.

From the feedback I get, there is a sizeable group of Singaporeans who say they supported the PAP in the early years but now feel it isn't the party they knew.

Their criticisms: It has become elitist, is no longer in touch with the lives of ordinary people, and its market-driven policies have departed too much from its socialist roots.

Which raises the intriguing question: Can the party change and win over these one-time supporters?

Is it possible for it to again be the party it was in the 1960s and 1970s, trusted by the people to overcome the odds that must have seemed even more insurmountable than today's challenges?

If it is able to make the changes - whatever these might be - and transform itself, who is to say it will not regain its past dominance?

But can it?

More pertinently, can change come from within, or will it have to be from without?

Political parties elsewhere have had to face this same question whenever their survival has been at stake.

In the 1990s, Britain's Labour Party, which had spent almost 20 years in opposition, transformed itself into New Labour under Tony Blair, shifting to the centre and discarding many of its left-wing tendencies.

It won the 1997 elections by a landslide.

Earlier in the 1970s, the Conservative Party was rejuvenated by a leader who went on to become Britain's longest-serving prime minister of the 20th century and the only woman to hold office, Margaret Thatcher.

These parties found new impetus to change and they did so successfully.

To be fair, the PAP has responded to many of the issues that caused it to lose ground in the 2011 General Election.

But whether the changes have been far-reaching enough for it to retain its dominance remains to be seen.

Scenario 2: Out and back again

The second scenario starts with the PAP unable to make the changes needed to stem its decline.

It loses a general election, and perhaps the next one as well.

But the opposition party in power lacks the experience and wherewithal to govern well, fumbles badly, and loses the support of the people.

The PAP is voted back in.

Another 50 years?

That will require the PAP to be so chastened by its years in opposition, it renews itself in heroic fashion to recapture the people's trust.

This comeback scenario isn't unique and has been replayed elsewhere, most recently with the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan.

Don't rule out it happening here.

Scenario 3: A near-death experience

Many people attribute the PAP's long hold on power to the trauma that Singaporeans experienced when the country was expelled from Malaysia in 1965.

That separation was so life-threatening, the people rallied behind the Government to make a superhuman effort to succeed.

Might another near-death experience for Singapore result in a similar outcome?

A long, deep and paralysing global recession? Conflicts in the region? A war between the major powers in Asia?

Faced with impending danger, Singaporeans are more likely to want to unite than divide, possibly behind the party they know.

Without this external threat to their survival, it is likely the opposition tide of recent years will continue, and erode the PAP's dominance.

Which of these three scenarios is the most likely?

The big unknown is the electorate.

A sea change in the people's attitudes and outlook has taken place, especially in their relationship with the Government.

It has ushered in a period of electoral uncertainty, and where it will lead to eventually is hard to say.

As someone once said, prediction is very difficult, especially if it is about the future.