

Singaporeans value growth over freedom of speech: Poll

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A MAJORITY of Singaporeans prize economic growth over freedom of speech, but believe that there are too many political restrictions here, a new survey has found.

Most also agree that Singapore should have a powerful leader who can run the Government as he thinks fit, yet want everyone to be able to criticise the Government publicly.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) polled 1,092 citizens aged 21 years and above in July and August last year and found a generation gap in political orientation.

Those aged below 40 displayed a more 'liberal' political attitude than those aged 40 to 59, who in turn were generally more liberal than those aged above 60.

The survey asked respondents to indicate their agreement, or lack thereof, regarding four statements.

Two were 'conservative' in nature: 'Singapore should have a powerful leader who can run the Government as he thinks fit', and 'It is more important to have good economic growth than freedom of speech'.

These are tenets which political watchers have attributed to the People's Action Party's mode of governance.

On these statements, seven out of 10 respondents said they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. The other two statements were 'liberal' in nature, invoking criticisms which have been levelled at the PAP Government: 'There are too many rules against participating in political activities in Singapore,' and 'Everyone should be given the freedom to criticise the Government publicly.'

Six out of 10 agreed or strongly agreed that there were too many rules; five out of 10 agreed or strongly agreed that everyone should be able to criticise the Government.

According to IPS senior research fellow Tan Tarn How, who led the study, a substantial segment of respondents agreed with both the liberal and conservative statements, despite the contradiction seemingly inherent in this.

The other two scholars involved in the study are from the communications and new media programme of the National University of Singapore: visiting fellow Chung Siyoung and assistant professor Zhang Weiyu.

Among those who want a strong leader, 62 per cent think there are too many rules against political participation.

Among those who say there are too many rules, 76 per cent want a strong leader. 'This shows, somewhat surprisingly, that Singaporeans show a desire not only for strong leadership and economic growth but also for more freedom to take part in politics,' the researchers noted.

Some Singaporeans, like entrepreneur Chong Wei Yong, 33, do not see this as contradictory. He said: 'With so much collective wealth, Singaporeans should now have a say in how it is managed.'

Dr Kenneth Paul Tan, associate professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and visiting fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, noted that the statements are 'vague and contain too many ideas'.

He cautioned that the respondents may have been responding 'impressionistically' for the most part, and said that further questioning may have exposed flaws in their reasoning.

'I would be interested to know if the 60 per cent of respondents who agreed that there are too many rules can identify those rules, or if they know of anyone who has been prevented from engaging in political participation because of these rules,' he said.

Across the four statements, the younger the respondent group, the less conservative. Younger people were also more open about their political allegiances. When asked who they voted for in the 2006 General Election, only one in 10 refused to answer, in contrast to one in four in the older age groups.

As expected, younger people are more politically active online. A total of 25.5 per cent took part in activities like signing petitions and reading and writing about politics online, compared with 16.8 per cent of respondents altogether.

Mr Praveen Velu, 31, a National Solidarity Party volunteer, said the Internet has been a crucial tool for young activists: 'It's easier to exchange information, organise yourselves and find other like-minded people.'
