

Singaporeans will decide if country is ready for multi-party system, say panellists at IPS forum

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Will Singapore have a flourishing two party system in a decade? Three politicians whose parties are represented in Parliament today say it is not impossible.

But how Singapore's political system will ultimately evolve will depend on the electorate, they added.

Senior Minister of State Janil Puthuchery, Aljunied GRC MP Gerald Giam and Non-Constituency MP Hazel Poa were discussing what politics in Singapore will be like in 2030 at the Singapore Perspectives 2021 conference on Monday (Jan 25).

Dr Janil, who is at the ministries of Communications and Information, and Health, and heads the PAP's youth wing, said whether Singapore ends up with a multi-party or two-party system that sees parties coming and going as if through a revolving door, as has happened around the world, will be decided by Singaporeans.

He was responding to a question from former nominated MP and theatre actress Janice Koh, who asked if the People's Action Party still held the belief that a two-party system is not feasible after General Election 2020, in which the Workers' Party (WP) made more headway by winning 10 parliamentary seats.

Dr Janil said: "I think it's about how people will vote and what are the proposals and offerings made by the parties. And the people of Singapore will make that decision about what they want as that equilibrium."

As for the PAP, its duty is to do its best for the people it seeks to represent, he added.

This means the party will continue to do its utmost to be the best possible party and to compete for talent as hard as any other parties, he said.

"I think your question is what will the PAP do to bring about that equilibrium... It would be unconscionable of us to say 'Let us weaken our offering deliberately, let us deliberately do badly by the system' in order to then achieve an outcome which may or may not be desirable by Singaporeans," said Dr Janil.

"Our duty is to make the best possible offering, discharge our duty as best as possible."

During the session moderated by IPS deputy director of research Gillian Koh, the panellists also discussed the possible drawbacks of a multi-party system. Tan Ean Kiam Foundation chairman Tan Keng Soon, who attended the event held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, which was also streamed online, asked if the Government may become less effective.

Citing the early policy to make English the lingua franca of Singapore, he suggested that the Government would be hard pressed to make such unpopular but ultimately beneficial decisions today as it could cost votes.

"What we need is... a dominant party and a weak opposition to stick a needle on its back. I think that is the golden means and I think we've already achieved that," said Mr Tan.

But Mr Giam said both the Government and the opposition may have to make such painful decisions, and responsible parties that act in the interest of the country will transparently explain policies and persuade the electorate.

He also added that Singaporeans' support of unpopular policies in the country's early days could be due to the fact that they were willing to make sacrifices for the sake of its survival, and not because they were "muzzled" by the climate of fear resulting from a one-party system.

Mr Giam, who is the head of the WP's policy research team, said it comes down to the electorate choosing the right parties or politicians who will put country above party or personal interests.

He also said that a multi-party system in Singapore may not necessarily go the way of some democracies which have been torn apart by political tribalism, adding that whether politics becomes more divisive will be determined by the Government's willingness to accommodate opposing viewpoints.

"We in tiny Singapore have the opportunity to show the world a better way to respect each other and resolve our differences," he added.

Echoing these views, Ms Poa from the Progress Singapore Party said: "It's up to us to determine what kind of politics we can have in Singapore. We have been having more representation in Parliament, and I don't think there has been any increase in divisiveness."

She added that while a one-party system may have allowed Singapore to progress more quickly in Singapore's early days, the way forward is now more uncertain and it would be too risk to rely on just one party.

Another question the panellists were asked was whether a non-Chinese could be prime minister of Singapore.

Ms Poa said she felt Singaporeans are ready to have a non-Chinese prime minister and "the only reason we are not ready is the PAP is not ready".

Mr Giam also said that Singaporeans he has spoken to have not said they would not want a non-Chinese as prime minister, adding that in Singapore the prime minister is not directly elected by the people, but is elected or selected by the party in power.

"So it is really the decisions of the individual parties, whether they feel that in their electoral calculations, in their internal calculations, they want to field a non-Chinese as party leader

and secretary-general," he said noting that the WP had said yes to it in 2018 when Mr Pritam Singh was elected party chief.

Mr Giam said the party has achieved a relative degree of electoral success with Mr Singh at the helm, and had also won Aljunied GRC with three non-Chinese members on its slate - Mr Singh, Mr Leon Perera and Mr Faisal Manap - as well as two Chinese MPs, himself and Ms Sylvia Lim, who are of Peranakan descent and "don't speak Chinese very well".

"If race and language were such an important factor for such an important constituency, we would have made sure we fielded a more Chinese slate. But we made our calculations that this was the suitable slate of candidates that would be able to serve residents of Aljunied GRC well, and that's why we choose that slate regardless of race," he added.

Dr Janil, meanwhile, noted that many surveys and studies show that race still matters to Singaporeans.

He said he wished it was not so, adding: "I do hope that our racial harmony progresses to the point where when people talk about a non-Chinese prime minister, it's not about an icon of resetting or an icon of re-imagining, as in the question that was put up on the screen, but on the basis of that person's ability to do the job.

"And that will be for Singaporeans to decide."