S'pore politics 2030

A one-party dominant political system has been the hallmark of Singapore since independence. Is that set to change?

Jeremy Au Yong
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If there is a consensus about the trajectory of Singapore politics, it is that the country is on a slow, if unstoppable, drift towards liberalisation.

As constrained as some might feel the scene is today, a glance back just five or 10 years into the past will reveal a clear pattern of a government loosening its tight rein on political expression little by little, one protest or online election campaign at a time.

Yet, for Singaporeans clamouring for a Western-style liberal democracy, the true mark of Singapore's arrival will be when that drift ends in a two-party or multiparty democracy.

Rather than a single party controlling the bulk of parliamentary seats, political contestation would be marked by two or more strong parties, vying continuously to gain an edge in parliamentary seats won.

But is this where Singapore is necessarily headed? Will we get there by 2030? And is this ultimately the system we want?

The Times, They Are A-Changing

Those who think Singapore is headed towards a multiparty democracy can point to the erosion of the People's Action Party's (PAP's) vote share at consecutive elections, the first- ever loss of a group representation constituency at the 2011 General Election and a seemingly growing appetite worldwide for political change.

The PAP's 2011 share of the popular vote - 60.1 per cent - marked a historic low. In 1991, when the PAP lost a then-unprecedented four seats, it still managed 61 per cent of the vote.

The 2011 Election was also notable for the defeat of a strong PAP team helmed by then Foreign Minister George Yeo and including newcomer and potential office holder Ong Ye Kung.

It mirrored political change around the world. In Japan, Australia and South Korea, long-standing incumbents have been defeated at the polls. In the Middle East, the Arab Spring has seen the downfall of more than one authoritarian regime.

Harvard professor of leadership Barbara Kellerman notes Singapore is far from immune from the current "tide of history".

"In general, leaders are being demeaned and diminished, while followers are more reluctant to follow," she tells Insight.

Mr Yeo explained his decision to quit politics after 23 years in terms of this same tide, which he could do little to turn back.

Speaking to the South China Morning Post, Mr Yeo said the man who defeated him, Mr Low Thia Khiang of the Workers' Party (WP), told reporters that he and his team won not because his PAP opponents failed to do a good job, but because people wanted the opposition team in Parliament.

Mr Yeo added: "I thought if there was not something that I could change, because it was not something about me, maybe it was time to open a new chapter of my life."

All these seem to portend a seemingly inevitable weakening of the PAP's dominance, which would thus leave the door open for someone else.

Stop At Two?

First-past-the-post electoral systems like Singapore's tend to create two-party structures.

In such systems, weak parties either end up merging with each other or being eliminated, leaving just two strong players, argues political scientist Maurice Duverger.

A critical part of this process, of course, is the separation of stronger parties from the rest of the field. And at the last general election in 2011, the WP clearly emerged as the preferred alternative party.

The WP has eight of the nine opposition members in Parliament, and enjoys strong brand recognition. In 2011, the party did not poll less than 40 per cent in any contest it entered.

Still, WP dominance in the opposition does not get Singapore anywhere close to a two-party system, and that end, even for the most committed opposition supporter, is not a safe assumption.

For years, opposition members have made the case for a shift towards proportional representation, at least for some seats in Parliament.

With proportional representation, seats would be allocated according to a party's vote share. Historically, the opposition's vote share in Singapore general elections has ranged from 22.3 per cent to 39.9 per cent, while its share of Parliament has languished at well below 10 per cent.

Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan argued recently that a mixed system that combines proportional representation and first past the post, as in Germany and South Korea, "makes for a lot more sense and a more responsive government".

Yet, such a change seems unlikely.

"I don't see it happening. I think it requires too much of a change for Singapore," says former nominated MP Siew Kum Hong. He previously argued in Parliament for some seats to be allocated according to the proportional representation system.

And there also does not appear to be the correct set of circumstances that might lead those in power to support such a change.

By its very nature, such systems prevent absolute victory and absolute defeat. For incumbents to support it would require there to be so much uncertainty in the electorate that they feel a very real threat of losing it all.

"I have never seen the PAP adopt a strategy of minimising its losses," says Mr Siew.

Only Room for One?

The WP leadership has long maintained that it is not yet ready to govern Singapore, and other opposition parties like the National Solidarity Party have said the same.

At the crux of the argument are two factors: talent and consensus.

On the matter of talent, all opposition parties will readily admit that they do not have enough people of quality to take over from the PAP at this point. The question is whether they will ever be ready.

This is an argument that the PAP itself has made numerous times.

In September 2011, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew gave reasons why he believed a two-party system was both not sustainable and not desirable in Singapore: "Among other reasons, I do not think Singapore can produce two top-class teams. We haven't the talent to produce two top-class teams."

Mr Lee added: "When you have popular democracy, to win votes you got to give more and more.

"And to beat your opponent in the next election, you got to promise to give more away. So it's a never-ending process of auctions - and the cost, the debt being paid for by the next generation. So that's it."

Earlier that year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had made a similar argument. "To form an opposition to be a sparring partner, yes, you can do that. To form an opposition to be a hot stand-by which can switch over, that's a different proposition."

In that same interview, he also touched on the second factor that needs to be taken into account when considering a two-party system: consensus.

Two-party systems, he pointed out, must be based on certain divides - such as race, class, ideology, policy or geography.

He said: "What divides these two groups of supporters? Is it race? That's disastrous. Is it class? That's possible, like in the UK, but that's not good for Singapore. Is it policy? I very much doubt it because in Singapore you don't have a wide range of policy choices to make."

While many political observers are far from convinced that there is a lack of talent to form two teams, they do accept that there may be insufficient differences of view among Singaporeans to generate an equilibrium that involves two parties. One side may always have to win.

Those who hold this view argue that in a small city-state, it is more likely that there will always be a mainstream view, and whoever can capture that will be dominant.

Indeed, Singaporeans are generally too pragmatic a lot to be wedded to any particular form of government.

A recent poll of 400 students by the National University of Singapore Students' Political Association found no clear desire among the young for a two-party system. In fact, two-thirds said that the performance of the parties will determine if such a system is a boon or bane.

That said, it does appear that the kind of control the PAP has enjoyed for half a century does seem to be taking its toll. There are signs that people now blame all manner of things on the party.

Even while more people might be inclined to see the PAP's dominance curbed, there is as yet no critical mass of voters pushing for a shift to full-on, Western-style liberal democracy.

Where does that leave Singapore politics?

The Next Four Elections

The way ahead may well depend on what the PAP does in the years and elections to come.

For Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies, the extent that the country moves towards a two-party system depends on how connected to the people the PAP stays.

"To the extent that it succeeds, the 'demand' for opposition politicians and parties will diminish. To the extent that it doesn't, the 'demand', scope and therefore level of contestation between the opposition and the PAP will increase," she says.

Mr Eugene Tan, a Nominated MP and law professor from the Singapore Management University (SMU), is looking to the next general election for clues.

He says that it might not be safe to simply extrapolate based on the results of the 2011 polls. He pointed to 1991 - when the opposition won four seats - as a "false political dawn".

The PAP made a strong comeback at the next polls in 1997, winning back two of the four seats.It was another 14 years before the opposition, led by the WP, made significant inroads once more.

And while he believes Singapore will ultimately get to a two-party system, the timeline could change drastically, depending on whether the PAP is able to stem the electoral slide at the next general election, he says.

The PAP is all too aware of its need to regain and hold its ground. And in the 18 months since the last general election, it has moved decisively to address past policy missteps.

The national conversation exercise is also an attempt to engage the ground. These efforts have not struck a strong chord thus far, which the party will need to do if it is to improve on its performance at the last polls.

One big problem is political succession. In a time when demands on PAP MPs have increased, a better educated electorate has many voters who no longer treat politicians with the same reverence as in the past. The combination will likely make it harder to entice talent into politics to serve in government.

But this is a difficulty for all parties, and the difficulty is in part due to the trust that Singaporeans continue to have in the PAP. Most feel no need to enter politics with a competent incumbent in place. If the PAP can retain that trust, it will still be best placed among political parties to persuade good and able men and women to join its ranks.

Another factor that might come into play is the electoral fortunes of GRCs at future polls. The loss of Aljunied two years ago may have changed the way GRCs are looked at.

SMU assistant professor of law Jack Lee said with the PAP's loss of Aljunied GRC, "it no longer looks impossible for opposition parties to contest GRCs successfully".

The PAP may well move to further reduce the size and number of GRCs, a process PM Lee started at the last polls.

When Mr Lee was asked late last year if the PAP would remain dominant in the years to come, he said: "I don't know. The question is, will there be a stable consensus in the society on the direction we want to go?

"If there is, then there can be one party which has got a strong mandate and can work on behalf of Singaporeans effectively."

Most believe that there will continue to be that consensus. And to the extent that the national conversation has produced signals, it is that Singaporeans are coalescing around a future that includes the values of a gracious society and a pursuit of happiness not anchored around wealth.

All things considered, it seems more likely than not that Singapore in 2030 will continue to have the PAP in charge as a single, dominant party, albeit with a smaller seat advantage in Parliament.

No one would rule out, however, the emergence of a two-party system, with the chance of a party other than the PAP in charge. Granted, swopping out a government that has been in power for over half a century is never going to be a smooth or painless process.

For that change to happen, the PAP would have to suffer a persistent erosion in popular support over several elections.

But given how pragmatic it is, the PAP would no doubt seek to counter this by moving to accommodate more alternative views and get not just its policies but also its politics right.