

The Party: Whither Internal Dynamism

Rachel Au-Yong

The Straits Times, 1 November 2014

A key question facing the PAP is whether it can avoid the fate of all dominant parties and stay in power for the next 30 years, never mind another 60.

Some say it is impossible. Even one of its own founders, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, has said it is an irrelevant question because it is about whether Singapore - not the PAP - survives. Yet, the two are so tethered, people find it hard to imagine one without the other.

One possibility that could unravel the PAP's dominance is any emergence of corruption and nepotism. The PAP has long prided itself on its zero tolerance for corruption - its first landslide victory in 1959 came on the promise of clean government, with Mr Lee asking his comrades to come dressed in the now signature all-white to represent cleanliness.

Just last year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated his father's high standards at an annual planning seminar for public servants: "The Government must have a culture that doesn't tolerate any wrongdoing or dishonesty." That's because one major factor that will determine whether the Government succeeds in rolling out its policies is whether it has the trust of the citizens, he said.

But while it may demand the highest standards of its ranks, it has not been spared slip-ups. The case of the late national development minister Teh Cheang Wan who was found to have been corrupt, is one dark example. More recently, former Speaker Michael Palmer's peccadilloes forced him to resign from office. In both instances, the party had to go out of its way to show opprobrium.

Another potential weak spot: If the PAP is unable to adjust to changing times and the ever-evolving demands of the electorate - such as being able to connect with voters at a more empathetic level.

Noting its previous perception of being paternalistic, Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua says "the party's DNA has slowly but surely been modified", and points to the year-long Our Singapore Conversations and increasingly frequent public consultations as evidence of a more communicative style.

But this might not be enough.

"The middle class will become more vocal: they don't get as much help as their lower-class colleagues, but they are also feeling the pinch of rising costs of living," argues National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist and former Nominated MP Paulin Straughan. And while their needs are more aspirational, such as owning a car rather than, say, just having enough food, "the party cannot dismiss them and say, 'Live with it, go take public transportation'."

Problem Three: The PAP may have to trade off some of its long-term thinking for short-term immediate gains; its time horizon has to change.

But three-term MP Cedric Foo (Pioneer) hopes this will not come at too high a cost for the country.

"One might feel there are too many immigrants competing for ... jobs and schools, but Singapore is resource-poor, we need them to be health-care workers, expand our tax base, for our continued economic viability," he says.

"But when you talk about short-term personal sacrifices for the long-term good of the country, that can be a bit esoteric for the average family."

Fourth potential weak spot: If PAP fails to attract the right kind of talent that can connect with voters. The party must recruit and retain political candidates beyond its traditional base of the public service, argues Ms Phua, to rally supporters from a broader base.

NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser says the PAP can expect to fight in the margins, and it can secure a win only by establishing more personal relationships with the electorate.

To do so, it must keep an eye out for people who can respond to the next generation of voters, or risk short-circuiting its existence, says political scientist Bilveer Singh. "If you look at the current fourth generation of PAP leaders, it says a lot: there are those who like to dance, sing, don't wear the all-white PAP uniform. That's one clear way the party is responding to the new voters," he says.

Another possibility that could weaken the PAP: an internal split brought on by fundamental clashes over religiously influenced issues, such as the casino debate or homosexuality or even the right trajectory for economic growth and distribution. Splits could also come about through the rise of mavericks wanting to carve out their own base.

But first-term PAP MP Vikram Nair (Sembawang GRC) points out: "The PAP has continued, but the people change quite a bit. They consciously retire. I think that's why we don't have power-hungry politicians in here - we know we're just custodians, and someone younger and more energetic will one day take over."

Mr Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan Toa-Payoh GRC), no stranger to contrarian views in Parliament on issues like Section 377A of the law which criminalises sex between men, does not think that differing viewpoints weaken the party.

"They show that PAP MPs express honest positions on issues, particularly the difficult ones," he says. "That should give you confidence. In contrast, opposition parties have, by and large, stayed away from difficult subjects. And the problem with that is that you will not know what you are getting until it is too late."

PAP AS BANYAN TREE

The PAP might also lose dominance if it over-manages civil society, which could be an unexpected ally. Singaporeans are pragmatic enough to know that the check on a political party can come from civil society, argues former Nominated MP and consultancy boss Viswa Sadasivan. The problem is that it has not been allowed to flourish for a long time.

"When you have a huge banyan tree, it provides ample shade and everyone is very comfortable. But the canopy blocks out sunlight, and nothing can grow under it. The banyan

tree has to be dismantled to let some light in," he says. "The PAP must be more willing to stand up and defend itself, instead of suppressing contrary views."

Lastly, the party could also come undone by holding on to unrealistic expectations that dominance must mean a near-unfettered hold of Parliament.

While before, party leaders may have lamented openly about the distractions an opposition can pose to the serious business of governing, such discourse has petered out post-2011, note observers. The PAP now has to coexist alongside nine opposition members in Parliament - the biggest number since the Barisan walkout of 1966 - and must adjust to this new reality of more competitive politics.

So the question is whether the PAP can continue its proven track record of leadership in managing the country with a clear eye on the long term, even as it tackles the day-to-day political challenges that arise in a democracy with an active, growing opposition.