Trust in Public Institutions: Can Singapore Afford Cracks?

In his message to mark Public Service Week this week, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean talked about the need for civil servants to support front-line colleagues should they be subject to unfair accusations or abuse. His remarks put the spotlight on what many see as a gradual erosion of trust in Singapore's public institutions. They have played a critical role in the country's success, and some find recent attacks against them troubling. Jeremy Au Yong reports.

Jeremy Auyong
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A hypothetical scenario was put forward by Professor Kishore Mahbubani in The Straits Times last month: What would happen if people were stuck in an MRT breakdown and did not trust the public transport operator to fix the problem or the authorities to come to their rescue?
When trains broke down on the North-South line in 2011, the answer to that question was that commuters sat in stifling heat for up to an hour before they were rescued by SMRT staff.

But Prof Mahbubani, the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, suspects that the situation would be far less calm if the trust was missing.

In a column voicing concern about online cynicism eroding trust in public institutions, he said: "We have been free from riots for almost 40 years. The reasons were simple: rising living standards and rising trust in public institutions. But if this trust becomes a declining commodity and if a major public service performs badly, it would be unwise to expect the same level of social harmony."

Netizens and social media users were quick to fire back, stressing that their cynicism was founded on valid grounds.

Mr Allen Tan wrote to The Straits Times Forum Page, saying trust is not earned in perpetuity: "In the case of SMRT, there is a perception of consistent decline in service delivery and reliability, leading to an erosion of trust and confidence. Trust and confidence are earned by merit."

The episode is indicative of the harsh treatment Singapore's public institutions are beginning to receive.

At a protest in Hong Lim Park two weeks ago linked to the Malaysian elections, some of those who attended decided to harass people they identified as police officers, later proudly putting videos of their act online.

The scrutiny, of course, has not been limited to Singaporeans. Just after the Hong Lim Park incident, the coroner's inquiry into the death of American Shane Todd began.

The saga had started weeks ago, when the family of Dr Todd conducted a high-profile media campaign here casting doubt on the findings of the Singapore Police Force.

The family alleged that their son did not commit suicide as the police had claimed. On Tuesday, they walked out of court, saying they had "lost faith" in the proceedings. They later told the court that they would no longer be participating in the proceedings.

Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam described the Todd family's decision to walk out as "regrettable", saying that key questions in the case could have been addressed better if they had chosen to testify in court.

Mr Shanmugam also noted that the family chose to quit proceedings a day after their key witness retracted his conclusion that Dr Todd had been strangled to death with a cord or wire.

The new environment that civil servants are operating in was addressed by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean this week in his message to commemorate Public Service Week.

While noting that civil servants now have a new opportunity to work with the public, this engagement needed to be done in the spirit of "mutual trust and respect".

As he called on civil servants to maintain good standards of service, he said "we should support our officers should they be subject to unfair accusations and abuse".

While many of Singapore's institutions have a long history of being regarded with the utmost trust, a maturing population is proving more questioning and less willing to accept public pronouncements just on good faith.

The question now is: Is the high level of trust experienced for the first 40 years of independence likely to continue going forward? Is it even possible to maintain that high level of trust, in today's political circumstances?

And if there is a need to preserve this trust, how is this reconciled with an ongoing push for Singaporeans to be more active players in nation-building?

The Slippery Slope

The current arc of history seems to suggest that this is generally a bad time to be a public institution.

A Gallup poll in the United States found that in the decade between 2002 and 2011, social trust fell for a large majority of its public institutions. Trust dipped 1 per cent for the military, 23 per cent for the presidency, 4 per cent for the public education system and 24 per cent for banks.

No similar fine-grain data exists for Singapore although the broad Edelman Trust Barometer - which measures trust in business, government, non-governmental organisations and media among 26 economies - shows a high level of trust here. Singapore is at No. 2, just behind China.

Granted, the context behind the steep erosion of trust in countries like the US is vastly different from that in Singapore. For one thing, while Singapore has had its share of scandals, the lapses are not of the scale of, say, Watergate in the US.

Analysts who spoke to The Straits Times were careful not to paint any doomsday scenarios of any precipitous plunge in public trust, although they believe that maintaining past levels is increasingly a challenge.

Sociologist Daniel Goh, who studies political sociology, stresses that trust in Singapore remains high, even though criticism online has been growing.

"We shouldn't confuse being critical of government policy and engaging in public sphere debate with the erosion of trust and respect. (That) happens when laws are deliberately disobeyed, whether violently or non-violently. Note that all attempts at some kind of civil disobedience campaign in Singapore (protests outside of Speakers' Corner), no matter how mild, have failed to garner support."

Yet there is concern that Singapore's special set of circumstances means that any significant decline in trust could have a deeply adverse impact.

Prof Mahbubani and Professor Chan Heng Chee, both former ambassadors, talk about how the small country was able to punch above its weight on the international scene because of the respect others have for Singapore's institutions.

More so than any other single aspect, Singapore's brand name, they say, stems from things like trust in the judiciary, the reliability of the Government and the competence of those who have emerged from its education system.

Says Prof Chan: "When Singapore students go overseas, and they enter foreign universities, there is an expectation of competence and quality. When businesses come to Singapore, they expect a certain quality and competence, and public institutions are functioning."

National University of Singapore sociologist and former Nominated MP Paulin Straughan put it this way: "Singapore engages the world through economics and good governance. There is nothing else we have that the world wants. The minute this is gone, how do we distinguish ourselves from others?"

Evolving Trust

SOME of the blame for any perceived erosion of trust must certainly fall on the public institutions themselves.

The past year has seen a series of high-profile corruption cases involving high-ranking civil servants that can prompt questions about the organisations they lead. Frequent breakdowns of public transport also inevitably erode some confidence in the competence of the providers.

It would be a stretch to say that these incidents are the key driver in any perceived dip in public trust, but they certainly have contributed to the problem.

In that sense, Prof Mahbubani says, the lapses and scandals are a reflection that "we have a more normal population in Singapore" now.

"In the past, it's as if we had a priesthood in the civil service," he says. "These things will happen. We just have to make sure we take action if they break the rules."

Adds Dr Goh: "The only issue that is important is whether they (civil servants in the scandals) were accountable to the public as persons holding office of public trust. The issue is not whether they had extramarital affairs, but whether these affairs that took place while they were in office affected their performance of their public duties."

Beyond these lapses, though, observers say the political maturing of Singaporeans and a more complex governance environment provides a broader backdrop to any perceived erosion of trust in public institutions.

Now that Singapore has made strides in terms of its economic indicators and social well-being indicators, society is looking to development in political engagement.

"If we are in chaos, then we appreciate strong leadership. But we've come to a phase of our development where we now want a say. There can no longer be unilateral projection ahead. Everyone wants a say in defining success, in writing the script," says Professor Straughan.

This is also seen in the slogans that have emerged from opposition parties. One message gaining traction in recent years talks about the need for the opposition to serve as a check against the People's Action Party (PAP).

The Workers' Party (WP) used a co-driver analogy during the 2011 polls and repeated it during the January by-election in Punggol East.

"I feel that our complete trust of the PAP in the past is dangerous," said WP chief Low Thia Khiang during a rally, adding that voters needed to back the WP as an effective "insurance".

And while there have been efforts by the Government to be more consultative - most obviously with the Our Singapore Conversation exercise - problems emerge when those trying to have their say do not feel they are being heard.

"What starts out as dissatisfaction with one agency can quickly be generalised to cover all of Government. If I am unhappy with the Land Transport Authority, it's easy for me to expand to cover all public institutions," Prof Straughan adds.

Part of that ease of generalisation is also down to how dominant the PAP has been over the years, and how it is synonymous with Government.

Added to the mix is a new environment of uncertainty, which both the Government and the public may not be used to.

Professor Neo Boon Siong of Nanyang Business School says: "We are all in a flux, and this gives people the feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty, that this competent Government we are used to... is not so ready to come up with solutions immediately, or cannot deliver results as fast as we want."

In 2007, he co-authored the book Dynamic Governance, which took an inside look at the Singapore civil service.

Prof Mahbubani acknowledges the new governance context, but stresses that his main concern is not any single episode but what he sees as an overly critical social media. "They are very quick to criticise but there is no attempt to balance this with recognition of our strengths."

It is a view of social media and governance that gels with remarks made by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the inaugural Singapore Summit last year.

He said that while the Internet helps to organise more effectively, it makes it harder for societies to take a longer view.

"Governing becomes a 24/7 referendum. And it reduces the common ground that citizens of a country share with one another, because it makes it easier for people to interact only with the people they want to interact with."

Trust Versus Over-reliance

In 2010, then Institute of Policy Studies director Ong Keng Yong said in a speech that "too much blind trust" in a government may lead to undesirable effects such as depending on the state to do everything.

"The resulting spoon-feeding would, in turn, hamper active citizenry and undermine the merit of self-help," he said.

"To avoid such an eventuality, there must be constant reminders not to be over-reliant on others and there must be a persistent emphasis on promoting personal and societal responsibilities among citizens."

But how does the Government promote trust in its institutions and personal responsibility at the same time?

Says Prof Neo: "For the long term, the fact that we cannot self-organise as a community to resolve some of our own problems is a lack of resilience.

"We are overly dependent on the Government. We are in a Catch-22 situation. The Government has to pull back and not be so active, and let citizens organise. But if they do that, they will appear to be less interested and less competent."

Conclusion

While there are no immediate obvious solutions, many say the approach needs to involve careful messaging.

Prof Straughan sees a continued need to focus on capable leadership, but for the nature of the trust to change: "Just because we have a more inclusive model of decision-making, doesn't mean you can do without a leader. We can all contribute our best thoughts, but we have to trust

that the leadership will have taken our contribution seriously, and even if my contribution was not included, I must be happy. I must have that trust."

There is also a need, says Prof Neo, for the civil service to drop its perceived aura of arrogance.

"They need to develop a new attitude and new way, be more willing to experiment, be transparent and not act as if they have all the solutions."

When it comes to dealing with the blogosphere, though, Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, argues that there is value in public institutions trying to engage online, because there are reasonable voices there.

"Public institutions may want to explore if more can be done in making information easily available to the public," she says. "This will help shift online discourse from noisy chatter to productive contribution for policymakers."

Ultimately, a new social compact may need to be formed between Singapore's public institutions and the people.

It needs to be one based on the recognition that no one - not institutions or individuals - has all the answers, and a willingness on all sides to work together to find the answer, instead of any one party throwing stones from the sidelines.