

Voters want a kinder, gentler politics, says Chan Heng Chee **She expects millennials to keep backing diverse voices as they age**

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The recent general election has made clear that a new political culture is emerging in Singapore, said Professor Chan Heng Chee.

The veteran diplomat noted yesterday how on the one hand, the political style of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) emphasises strong government, effectiveness, a legalistic culture and the delivery of a better life for the people - which some have called paternalistic.

On the other hand, many citizens want to see Singapore evolve into a full-fledged democracy. Observers have also expressed a desire for rules to be applied to all political participants fairly, and for gerrymandering to be restrained, she noted.

"Even as we yearn for democratic competition, competitive politics, we are asking for a kinder and gentler politics. We seem to be repulsed by the competitive, mean politics of some Western democracies," she said in a live-streamed lecture.

Prof Chan, an ambassador-at-large, was delivering the last of three lectures as the Institute of Policy Studies' 7th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. It was titled Singapore In A Time Of Flux: Optimism From The Jaws Of Gloom.

Giving her take on the election result - the PAP won 83 of 93 seats and 61.24 per cent of the popular vote, down from 69.9 per cent in 2015 - Prof Chan noted that youth aged 25 to 35 make up one of the biggest groups in the population.

The Workers' Party, which won an unprecedented 10 seats and a second GRC, understood this, choosing youthful candidates and issues that resonated with Generation Z voters, she added. "Clearly this age group bought the opposition message of the need for diverse voices in Parliament and the need for checks and balances," she said.

She noted that while conventional wisdom says people become more conservative as they get older, a Pew Research report suggests that American millennials and Generation Xers (those born between 1965 and 1980) are different from generations before them and have a distinct, increasingly liberal outlook on many issues.

"I expect our millennials will continue to support diverse voices and an opposition in Parliament as a good thing, even as they age...The incumbent party will have to understand this group better to win back their vote," she added.

Prof Chan noted that Singapore had a one-party Parliament from 1968 till 1981, with politics shifting to the bureaucracy. From 1981, a repoliticisation took place, and in 2011, the desire for political change erupted with the convergence of several "deeply felt social and economic issues", such as growing inequality and immigration, she added, describing this as the arrival of "populist politics" in Singapore.

The PAP subsequently managed to improve its vote share after introducing a slew of social and economic policies, and a series of consultations in 2012 and 2013. But with GE2020, "we see a fully repoliticised Singapore", she added.

In her lecture, Prof Chan offered a few ideas on how Singapore's governance model can shift. While the number of opposition parties has increased, there is also a "new mushrooming" of civil society organisations attracting young, educated and idealistic people, she said.

"The recent Covid-19 pandemic shows that civil society organisations have a role to play as an early warning system for social issues and fissures in society... no matter how unwelcome the feedback," said Prof Chan. These issues include the plight of abused women, the ageing poor, and foreign workers. The Government can work more closely with these groups, as both have common goals, she suggested.

More room for expression must also be given to encourage Singaporeans, especially the young, to think innovatively. "We should seriously discourage groupthink," she said. "If our political model needs fixing, it is how to accommodate differences and diverse views in our institutions and our country."

There is also a need to keep chipping away at the issue of inequality in order to guard against the threat of populism returning to Singapore's politics, she said. Critics have rightly pointed out that Singapore has high inequality compared with other developed economies, Prof Chan said. But she noted that Singapore's income figures show "tentative change in the right direction", compared with the industrialised democracies of the United States and Europe where incomes have stagnated or decreased. In the past decade, median incomes here have risen by 32 per cent in real terms.

She said Singapore is fortunate there are no ideologically conservative parties arguing against assisting the poor. "Rather, the debate is on why not give more, with the opposition pressing for bigger subsidies and giving to more groups."

The Government's response during Covid-19 attests to its understanding of societal needs, said Prof Chan, who added that its work in addressing inequality is never done.

"The goalposts change all the time, and so eliminating poverty is always a work in progress," she said.