

What if a rogue govt sprang from the bosom of PAP?

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Pundits and politicians give a wide spectrum of views on Singapore's political future.

For many Singaporeans grappling with the great unknown, however, the more pertinent and worrisome question is not whether PAP can survive Lee Kuan Yew but what comes after Lee Hsien Loong. Who will be the fourth prime minister of Singapore? Who will form the nucleus of the fourth generation leadership? What will be their world view, values, convictions, reflexes and instincts?

Will the new leaders who take over in 15 to 20 years be able to sustain the country in peace, progress and prosperity? Or will they preside over what doomsayers predict as an inevitable decline? Will good leadership plus good luck continue to favour Singapore? Or will black guards in white show their true colours?

As they contemplate the future of their children and grandchildren, they must wonder if the leaders of the next generation will espouse the same core values of whiter-than-white integrity, multi-racialism, meritocracy and social equity, and uphold the same moral sense of trusteeship over the massive accumulated assets belonging to the people of Singapore.

But leaders do not drop like manna from heaven. They will have to be voted in by the young of today who will form the bulk of the electorate tomorrow. Only they will know and decide what kind of leaders they want - not PAP, MM, SM, PM, the opposition or anyone else. As one of the best educated, best-travelled, most Internet-savvy and globally exposed populations in the world, will the new generation voters still accept PAP's leadership renewal system? Will they still buy into the party's vision and game plan? Or will their world view, or weltanschauung, as the Germans call it, be out of sync with that of the anointed PAP leaders?

Several scholars were quite sure that the new PAP leaders would not be able to forge the same social compact with the new generation that their predecessors did with the older one. They expressed doubts that the spirit of tripartism among government, employers and trade unions would even prevail. Reason: having gone through political upheavals and economic hard times together, the older generation and pioneering leaders had developed mutual trust and strong bonding. But the new generation accustomed to the good life with no memory of the republic's early struggles would have little or no emotional affinity for inducted technocratic leaders.

Never far from the Asian psyche is the notion that wealth is created by the first generation, spent by the second and lost by the third. So far, the PAP government has disproved the dictum but what guarantee does Singapore have that it will not be the fourth or fifth generation leaders who will finally do the plundering and the squandering?

Goh Chok Tong confessed that he spent sleepless nights agonising over the future leadership of the country. PM Lee expressed great concern over whether young Singaporeans would have the 'sense of social cohesion, consensus and missionary zeal to keep the country going'.

So which of the three scenarios sketched by PM Lee would materialise: an all-dominant PAP, a still dominant PAP but one which lost its elan, or a less dominant PAP vis-?-vis an emerging opposition? Or would a fourth scenario become reality - the fall of PAP?

There was one more scenario invoked by our interviewees. PAP leaders always assumed that if the opposition were to form the government, it would be a weak one which would ruin the country. The institutional safeguards they designed were supposed to prevent the emergence of a rogue government.

But what if the rogue government sprang from the bosom of the PAP itself? Was it inconceivable that a good PAP government might turn rotten mid-term or that a good prime minister could succumb to temptations along the way? How could the party be certain that it would always prove to be an exception to Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely?

Indeed the most nightmarish scenario cited by many interviewees would be a rogue PAP government in full control of all the levers of power and all the key institutions from the presidency, judiciary and civil service to the labour movement, grassroots associations, professional organisations and the mass media.

As political commentator Catherine Lim warned in a public forum in 2006, long after Lee had gone and his legacy diminished, 'there could appear a self-serving and corrupt leader who, because he wears the trusted PAP mantle, will get away with it. This is a frightening but possible scenario'.

Heaven forbid but if such a situation were to occur, would Singapore's highly ranked and much-envied system of governance be able to kick in with all its institutional locks and keys to check and oust a nefarious prime minister and his government?

Let's listen to what some PAP MPs said: yes, they would come into play. The elected president would veto the use of reserves and key public appointments and scrutinise the government's exercise of power in internal security and corruption cases. Honest ministers and MPs would act against a bad PM. Upright bureaucrats would rebel if forced to go against the civil service's best practices.

Perhaps they could take comfort in what Foreign Minister George Yeo once said: 'Nations with good institutions survive bad luck and bad leaders. In the nature of things, bad luck does not last forever. As for bad leaders, good institutions will eventually throw them out.'

Commenting on such a scenario, Lee Kuan Yew said that the elected president and the parliamentary system would be a check against the excesses of any prime minister. 'Singapore's prime minister remains in office only as long as he commands the confidence of the majority of MPs in parliament. If he turns bad, ministers and MPs will know that he will be a liability and not lead them to victory in the next elections. They can remove him by a vote of no confidence and/or the elected president can require the PM to seek a vote of confidence in the house.'

He also maintained that it was not true that the prime minister could have all the important institutions under his control. Key appointments were subject to the agreement of the president

and the council of presidential advisers, and top office bearers could not be removed by the PM without the consent of the president.

What if all these institutional measures failed? The ultimate check, according to some MPs, would be an electorate which was one of the best educated, most media-savvy and globally attuned generations in the world.

Having experienced and internalised the values of good governance, they would surely react with outrage and boot out a bad government through the ballot box.

Some foreign scholars ventured to say that internal political reaction would be matched by external countervailing forces. Former International Monetary Fund economist Henri Ghesquiere said that the thousands of multinational corporations in Singapore could act as a check against a PAP government going awry as their billion-dollar investments would be at stake.

Alarm bells would not only start ringing loudly among the Singapore public but also among the international investment community if the country's performance and governance rankings by global agencies fell drastically. Imagine the collective shivers if Transparency International were to rank Singapore as one of the most corrupt countries in Asia.

All these conjectures and concerns raise the perennial poser: Is it prudent to just depend on institutional checks and balances to keep Singapore safe and sound? It has been argued that no political scenario could be worse than a one-party system in which the ruling party collapsed one day out of internal rot and no other party could take over the reins of government. Depending on the army to run the country, as it has been suggested, was considered foolhardy going by the poor record of army-run regimes in the region.

Many people and pundits are coming around to the view that the best fallback would be a full, functioning bi-partisan system in which power could pass from one party to another, as in most developed democratic countries, without affecting political stability. Such a system was seen as a better safeguard and safety valve than depending on the invincibility and infallibility of the incumbent party and the citizens' blind trust in and complete reliance on the party. By a logical extension, a two-party check-and-balance system would be expected to provide greater transparency and accountability than a one-party self-checking system.

With a competitive political system, it was argued, people would have choices and learn to discuss options and issues and weigh costs and benefits. They would feel more engaged in the affairs of their nation and develop a sense of empowerment and belonging. They would gain political maturity from experiencing the consequences of their vote. Foreign investors would be less anxious when they realised that a political turnover would have no appreciable impact on their investments.

Among those who saw the merits of such a system was former top civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow. In an interview with *The Straits Times*, he said that Singapore would survive Lee provided he left the right legacy, which was to 'open up politically and allow talent to be spread throughout our society so that an alternative leadership can emerge'.

'Unless Lee allows serious political challenges to emerge from the alternative elite out there, the incumbent elite will just coast along. At the first sign of a grassroots revolt, they will probably

collapse just like the incumbent Progressive Party to the left-wing PAP onslaught in the late 1950s.'

Likewise, sociologist Chua Beng Huat believed that a two-party system would ultimately be better for Singapore as a nation as it constituted normal politics. One-party rule, he argued, was a historical aberration which should not be taken as the only logic.

'The fact that we became a single-party state had to do with the mistake of Barisan Socialis. If Barisan had stuck to it, we would now have a two-party state. PAP would probably still be the dominant party but you would actually have a serious opposition party. The single-party dominance is a historical phenomenon.

'It shouldn't be taken as the only logic of politics.'

Gillian Koh envisaged the political ideal as one which would ensure the survival of a country irrespective of which party was in power. Citing the example of Taiwan under the presidency of Democratic Progressive Party's Chen Shui-bian before he was replaced by Kuomintang's Ma Ying-jeou in 2008, the senior research fellow said: 'The country can now survive in spite of who is in power. It's not going to collapse. So even if you have a president who has completely lost all confidence of the people, the country will survive. There is the business sector, there is the people sector, there is a bureaucracy that will keep it going.'

Larry Diamond, a leading American scholar in the field of democracy studies, advanced the theory that what worked in economics should apply to politics as well. No matter how great the intellectual and administrative ability of a ruling elite, he said, rot and complacency would set in eventually without the discipline of competition.

'The PAP elite understand this on the economic side, which is why they pragmatically abandoned socialist inclinations and committed to market principles. Sooner or later they will need to realise that competition is just as important in governance as in economics, and that without the discipline of a true political marketplace, the storied governance miracle of Singapore will eventually begin to rot.

'The real challenge for PAP is a political one. How can they open up without risking their hold on power? I think they should have more confidence in their own high levels of governing competence, their ability to continue to deliver the goods of development. And I think they should have more confidence in their own citizens, who have the education and prudence to make sensible judgements about who should exercise power.'

Even some PAP MPs supported the idea of a good opposition waiting in the wings to prevent a PAP-or-nothing situation. In countries with a robust two-party system, said veteran PAP MP Charles Chong, either party could keep the country going.

'But here, if PAP collapses, Singapore will collapse too because really who is going to take over.'

If the opposition had sufficient credibility to present itself as an alternative government, said Baey Yam Keng, it would be for the good of Singapore.

'For us, it is good to have a challenge. It forces us to be on our toes and prove ourselves.'

Lui Tuck Yew believed that the right opposing voices would strengthen Singapore. 'At the end of the day, opposing voices that have the best interests of the people and country at heart must surely make for better policies and better programmes.'

If you took a leaf from PAP history in the 1960s, as some older Singaporeans pointed out, it was the do-or-die competition from the communists and leftists which kept the party on a razor's edge and acutely sensitised to the people's needs.

As Lee had admitted repeatedly, it was the standards set by his arch adversary Lim Chin Siong and comrades which compelled the English-educated leaders to match their dedication, tenacity, selflessness and integrity.

As the oft-asked question goes: If there is no political competition, who will keep the PAP honest?