

Signs of political maturity

The ruling party is opening up and willing to hear alternative and diverse views that represent Singaporeans.

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SINGAPORE is facing its most exciting elections to date. Senior Research fellow from the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies Dr Gillian Koh shares with Sunday Star what the buzz is all about.

> Why are elections this time around different?

It's the first time since independence that all but five seats (Tanjung Pagar) are being contested. About 94% will get to vote. This is important.

In recent decades, people would say PAP's mandate is not as strong because a good number of seats were from walkovers as the opposition did not field candidates. So now, whatever the outcome, you can say it's the result of contests. And those who are finally in Parliament are duly elected and have fought hard for their positions.

> Why are so many seats being contested?

In May 2009, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong introduced electoral reforms. They are to increase the number of single member constituencies (SMCs), reduce the average size of the group representation constituencies (GRCs) from 5.4 to 5, increase the possible number of Non-Constituency MPs (NCMP) which are seats offered to best losers and make permanent the Nominated MPs (NMP).

In total, 18 MPs would be alternative or opposition parliamentarians on top of the 87 who would be duly elected. That is a substantial force. What it does is change it so that there are consolation prizes for people who take the steps to contest from the opposition front.

Secondly, there is the symbolic act that the PAP government is very comfortable having a greater level of contests in elections. So it actually lowered the barriers and made it more attractive and less risky to “go ahead and contest the PAP” if you want to.

Over the years, we have seen the PAP government welcoming diverse views and alternative voices through the public consultation process and even through discussion in Parliament on very tough issues. These are issues that potentially could polarise society because they are value-based issues, like what can we do about gay rights and minimum wage which is a difficult issue as we have always tried to keep the labour market very flexible.

The third point is relaxing the rules for civil society to operate, like changing the speakers' corner to a demonstration corner which means you can now mobilise people to attend a discussion. Previously if you did, it could be construed as an illegal assembly!

Broadly speaking, there is that change in the political climate. The PM is trying to signal the fact that he'd be comfortable to hear alternative and diverse views that represent Singaporeans as long as the government has a right of reply. They are saying if you give me a robust argument, I can also return a robust argument back to you. As long as it is a discussion of the national interest of Singapore and what is good for Singaporeans and the discussion is kept within Singapore, we can discuss politics by Singaporean for Singaporeans.

> So the opening up is spearheaded by the PM himself?

It is actually the key signal that the PAP is comfortable with the competition of ideas. It is self-confident enough to take on those discussions as long as they are about Singaporeans and for Singaporeans.

It cannot be managed. It's about pulling out the restrictions and you don't know what would come out of that.

They have been trying to grow the political culture. But race and religion are topics that are out of bounds. We all feel it's a sensitive issue and know that those who play that

will very quickly become marginalised. And if they do, it is well within the rights of the state institutions to close that down.

We have also grown in the political culture sense in that we don't need foreigners to tell us what is in our national interest. We are well able to figure that out ourselves.

Of course, we take inspiration and comparative lessons from those outside us. We are not parochial and not so full of ourselves. What is being argued is that when it comes down to crunch, we know we are well able to form the debate based on our own considerations and arguments for Singaporeans.

> The previous system worked well for PAP all this while, so why rock the boat?

Society has changed. It's a problem of success. When we started off, we were all equally poor but today in 2011, people have benefited from growth and development and society is more diverse. There are different kinds of interest. Society is trying to sort itself out. There are those who are able to run very fast and those who progress slower. Which means there has to be some representation of those diverse experiences, which the PAP tries to do. It's a broad church of people who represent different sides of society. Certainly, there is scope for people with alternative views and the reforms take heed of these broader societal trends.

In the last election in 2006, the opposition across the board had the tagline of "you have a choice". This was somewhat attractive to the people on the ground that there would be a bit of that political choice on the ground.

I don't know if the PAP gets rewarded for taking heed but I think they go in with eyes open which brings me back to the point of how the PAP under Hsien Loong is more self-confident and ready to take on the diverse views and make its case publicly.

Actually, it's always done that. Even in the first generation, when Lee Kuan Yew wanted to "sell" something (an idea), he would go publicly to every platform he could find to explain what the policy is about. This has been a tradition, so this third-generation leadership is saying that we will continue to do that. But we are going to allow for the ground-up voices to come up.

While they always valued that through the public consultation process, it's also okay for this to translate into political parties that will actually challenge them in the general elections on their platforms.

> The mainstream media has also changed and people are surprised at how open it has become.

It is very important for the mainstream media to keep its relevance and readership. To do this, they must keep as close to what the public perceives as the existing reality.

Therefore, they have to represent the fact there are many more parties and many more players. Those have many more ideas and points of views.

> How much of it has to do with the alternative social media that has come out?

It's never just a "Oh I think it's a brilliant thing to do". It's about taking heed of the greater diversity, of the changes in the media space where there's far more use of social media, the new media, to share points of view on a daily basis among people globally.

Singaporeans would not be left out.

In the last elections, PAP had rather strict rules on the use of the Internet for elections. That was during the time pod casting was coming on and YouTube was not so huge yet. (Because of the rules) They couldn't play but members of the public could and those who did tended to be anti-establishment. So PAP themselves needed to change the rules so that they too could play and answer back. They have done that. They take heed of media communication changes.

It also is a part of political strategy for PAP to catch up and provide balance in so far as possible to discussions online.

So you will see that the mainstream media has gone online as well. And the people who go online are not necessarily going to the alternative (media), because the mainstream media allows discussion posts. The mainstream media is making itself relevant online.

> A number of Malaysians seem to think that Singaporeans have it all good jobs, good salaries, housing, world-class infrastructure. So what are they complaining about?

Man is a bundle of unsatisfied wants. Being so open, we are price-takers, so costs are going up everywhere petrol, food and land. We value quick transportation, so we complain about congestion. These are all things that are inevitable. Costs will go up.

I suppose Singaporeans are saying "we notice the price is going up, can the government do something about it?". It is election time and this is the time that Singaporeans can extract the most out of any government as possible. It sounds very transactional but that is the sort of politics that we have. Because the PAP has said "vote us and we deliver". So Singaporeans are saying "deliver this and we will vote you".

> But some have worked hard all their lives and retirement is a time to lay back and relax.

So I pay for you to lay back and retire? Do people want a form of government that takes them from cradle to grave. Are they prepared to pay for that?

The argument from the opposition parties is to tap on the foreign reserves. Is that something you want to do? Are you able to top up the reserves even as you use them or are you going to draw down? What's the game plan? Or do you want the system now where there are government subsidises for quite a lot of basics, a CPF scheme where you pay for yourself and take responsibility but you don't burden the next generation by making them pay the taxes ala the US. That's even more painful for the future generations. You'll have taxes up to your eyeballs.

> Will it be a slap if Foreign Minister George Yeo loses in Aljunied?

Hsien Loong and the PAP in general are ready. They are going into this with their eyes wide open.

They've made the right sounds. (Finance) Minister Tharman (Shanmugaratnam) said in a TV forum that a contest is going to be good for PAP and good for Singapore. So I don't think that they go in and say: "Oh, I don't know what's going to happen. Hantam lah!"

It's no surprise whatsoever when the PM said there's no fallback position if you lose the seat. That's why he's got young people.

> Why are many people of calibre willing to become opposition candidates?

First, the opposition has got to put the word out that they are going to be bold enough. If (opposition MP) Low Thia Kiang was going to stay in the Hougang constituency (where he has been MP since 1991), not many people would have been this interested anyway. Second, Sylvia Lim (also from the Workers Party) is quite persuasive.

And third, there are many people in Singapore of calibre. Every year, the best and brightest are sent out on scholarships and they come back and serve their bond. So there's this nurturing of a whole group of people with this public service ethos. It cannot be then that they have the same brain, same mind and same ideas. That's why they will emerge where they feel that maybe there is some blind spots in policy today or some gaps or some ways to improve. The PAP is already a broad church but there is more than enough space for other people to give their opinions and set themselves. That's normal.

> Before this, there was a culture of fear with Singaporeans when you ask them about politics. Has that gone?

That's dispelled now with the reforms, the change in tone in Parliament, the discussions and the liberalisation of the civil society space. You are saying getting rid of the climate of fear. I am saying it is "releasing" and allowing for voices to come up to discuss within the broad context Singapore politics for Singaporeans and what are the national interests.