

## **Gap between ruling elite and masses is biggest political risk for the PAP**

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What might cause the People's Action Party to lose power?

This was the subject of a lecture by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, erstwhile dissident journalist turned Establishment businessman and latterly the Institute of Policy Studies' first S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

Mr Ho painted three scenarios of how the PAP might lose dominance: a freak election result; an internal party split; and a massive loss of confidence in the PAP, due perhaps to corruption. He also cited factors that would erode support for the PAP: demography, its organisational structure and the relative strength of the opposition.

His speech can be found [here](#).

These are perfectly lucid analyses but also predictable, as he himself noted.

But it was his comments on what made Singapore less governable that I found more insightful.

He cited four factors that would make Singapore harder to govern, regardless of which party is in power.

These are:

“First, the ability of governments to control information will continue to erode, despite sometimes frantic and illogical attempts to stem it.”

“Second, it will be increasingly difficult to hold the political centre together in the midst of polarising extremes.”

“Third, diminution in the stature of political leadership will encourage the rise of so-called "non-constructive" politics.”

“Fourth, maintaining an ethos of egalitarianism in an increasingly unequal society will require more than just political oratory.”

On the last point, Mr Ho added:

“The gulf between rich and poor Singaporeans, not only in terms of wealth but also in terms of values, is probably more than ever before, and is continuing to widen.”

My take on this is that what makes Singapore less governable is also what might cause the PAP to lose power: the growing gap between rich and poor.

As Mr Ho points out, the gulf is widening, not only in income, but in values.

I think the biggest and most dangerous political divide in Singapore that can arise is that between the political and socioeconomic elite, and the hoi polloi.

We already see this happening in jurisdictions elsewhere. In Hong Kong, **chief executive C.Y. Leung said in an interview last week** that that if Hong Kong had free elections with candidates nominated by the public, then the largest sector of society would likely dominate the electoral process:

"If it's entirely a numbers game and numeric representation, then obviously you'd be talking to the half of the people in Hong Kong who earn less than US\$1,800 (S\$2,250) a month," Mr Leung said in comments published by the Wall Street Journal and International New York Times.

A few weeks ago, Mr Wang Zhenmin, a regular advisor to Beijing, had made a similar point, when he said greater democratic freedom in Hong Kong must be balanced against the city's powerful business elite who would have to share their "slice of the pie" with voters.

"The business community is in reality a very small group of elites in Hong Kong who control the destiny of the economy in Hong Kong. If we ignore their interests, Hong Kong capitalism will stop," he had said in August.

Such views are not the sole preserve of defenders of undemocratic Hong Kong's system. Even leaders of the world's freest country, the United States, are wont to express such a view in private.

Think back to Republican candidate Mitt Romney in the 2012 US presidential election. At a private \$50,000-a-head fund raising dinner, he responded to a question on his campaign strategy by dissing the 47 per cent of voters who are dependent on government aid and pay no taxes, who will support Democrat incumbent Barack Obama.

He said: "There are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That that's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what... These are people who pay no income tax...My job is is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives."

Mr Romney later claimed the comments which were secretly videotaped by a bartender at the dinner, were taken out of context.

**As New York Times' columnist Paul Krugman noted this week:**

"The political right has always been uncomfortable with democracy. No matter how well conservatives do in elections, no matter how thoroughly free-market ideology dominates

discourse, there is always an undercurrent of fear that the great unwashed will vote in left-wingers who will tax the rich, hand out largess to the poor, and destroy the economy.”

Mr Krugman describes America as being caught in a struggle between the plutocrats and the democrats, the way some depict the struggle in Hong Kong.

In Singapore, we don't see such a striking dichotomy -yet.

But if you were to read some of the comments online, you can see the rise of such polarised views - such as when bloggers and commenters paint the PAP as a bunch of self-serving elite people who pay themselves multi-million-dollar salaries to perpetuate a system in which they and their family members can become very rich.

We start to see the seeds of distrust being sowed - and a clear wedge driven between people and government, when activists demand the “return” of Central Provident Fund money - as though CPF monies are not clearly the sole property of each CPF member, as though they can be pilfered by a dishonest government.

Nor is it just some among the literate digerati who are at risk of sowing distrust.

When leaders and those in the elite shake their heads at a government policy and mutter that the PAP is “becoming populist”, they too drive a wedge between the government and the governed, as though doing something that makes a government popular is a bad thing for the country.

It can be, but it need not be.

A good government first needs to create the conditions for business to flourish. Then it needs to spend and redistribute the wealth created to maintain harmony and fairness in a society, to enhance citizens' wellbeing. Doing the latter is not being populist.

Spending money to ensure universal health coverage is not populist - just the responsibility of any decent, humane government that has the wherewithal to do so.

Helping the jobless and underemployed get back into the job marketplace via wage subsidies and training is not populist - just good old common sense to get people back onto their feet.

Nor is spending on early childhood education to help poor children do well in school populist - just good investment in these kids' futures.

If a government has rich state coffers, but its people feel stressed and anxious at every stage of their lives, it cannot be a good government.

A good government strikes a balance between collecting enough for a country's future, and spending enough for the present.

It has to satisfy the elite generating most of the wealth, and the masses whose labour help sustain it. The 47 per cent, the ones who earn below US\$1,800 a month.