

How governance could evolve Singapore: The next 50 years

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If the cornerstone of Singapore's success over the last 50 years hinged upon a highly centralised and effective system of governance, the next 50 years could entail a gradual reversal of roles — with the Government “letting go” and empowering a more sophisticated and demanding population.

As political observers point out, the challenges ahead are aplenty, not least an increasingly fragmented middle ground.

Said Institute of South-east Asian Studies senior fellow Terence Chong: “It is not hard to see society breaking up into different constituencies based on the issues of the day.”

If any evidence of this was needed, the recent Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) leadership tussle amply provided it.

For Singapore Management University law academic Eugene Tan, what the protracted public spat also threw up was the fact that Singaporeans, it seems, “have not learnt to resolve difficult issues without the need for ... subtle Government guidance”.

From ministers' public comments urging restraint to the statement from the National Council of Churches distancing the churches from the controversy, Assistant Professor Tan believe that much work went on behind the scenes even though the general perception was that the Government had largely stayed out of the saga.

Said Asst Prof Tan: “More often than not, (government intervention) was through third parties.”

Yet, a more diverse and complex society would make such an approach to governance increasingly untenable.

Dr Chong argued that it is perhaps in the best interests of both the Government and Singaporeans in general for the former to gradually reduce its influence.

He said: “Studies have shown that paternalist systems tend to homogenise or result in uniform opinions... Unless the system can accommodate mavericks or dissent, such a system will only produce cookie-cutter solutions.”

However, for a Government that is, in Dr Chong's words, “big on governance”, letting go is perhaps hard to do.

But Asst Prof Tan argued: “The question is not why should the Government ‘let go more’ but rather how to let go more such that it enhances our governance.”

And it could very well be the individual who finds it harder to adapt. “To be sure, Singaporeans have to take ownership of their ability to cope with a reduced Government presence in many facets of Singapore life,” added Asst Prof Tan.

But as Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh pointed out, a responsive political system and institutions attuned to the people's aspirations and daily needs would still lie at the heart of good governance.

Said Dr Koh: "If citizens begin to feel that there isn't such a system, will they uphold the key principles and systems of democratic rule and constitutionalism to find ways to channel their aspirations and concerns?"

"Will there be political leadership that acts responsibly and wisely in responding to this far more pluralistic political scene?" she asked.