

To build a nation from the bottom up; After 45 years of economic achievement, genuine political participation has to be the next stage

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The Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) latest survey on the emotional bonds of Singaporeans to the nation reminds us that nation-building is not just a work in progress but one that requires a lot of hard work. This is particularly so as Singapore society is changing rapidly.

The survey — the fourth in a series by Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser and Dr Gillian Koh — reveals that national loyalty and pride have remained steady since the first survey was conducted in 1993. But should we expect the indicators to be more unequivocal, or have we plateaued so quickly in less than 20 years?

Behind the reassuring headline figures of Singaporeans' relatively healthy sense of national loyalty and pride, the survey highlights that those who have benefited most from Singapore's economic growth are, ironically, the least likely to be loyal and proud of the nation.

Generally, the survey revealed that Singaporeans tend to express lower levels of national loyalty and national pride the higher their socio-economic status and the better educated they are. Similarly, the post-independence generation of youths and adults (aged 15 to 44) were less enthused about national loyalty and pride than older Singaporeans. The Chinese Singaporean also fared less well than his non-Chinese counterparts on these indicators.

The Problem with Economics

A key definer of Singaporeans' pride and loyalty is the country's economic achievements. The official discourse of our rapid move from Third World to First World has a strong instrumental bent to it. Our economic wealth and prowess are our most abiding expression of national pride and identity.

There's undoubtedly much to be proud of. In 1980, fifteen years after independence, our GDP was \$40 billion. Almost thirty years later, the figure was \$250 billion in 2009 — a six-fold increase in constant dollar terms. In the same period, our labour force tripled from 1 million to 3 million.

As Singaporeans are socialised to equate pride in and loyalty to Singapore in such transactionary and economic terms, it comes as no surprise that their pride and loyalty increase/decrease with better/weaker economic performance. Even the Ministers' and the public service bonuses are tied to the state of the economy!

While acutely important to a fledgling nation, economic performance alone is too banal a way to engender loyalty and pride.

Political participation can provide the moderating influence and catalyse nation-building. The survey demonstrated that Singaporeans seek to engage, and be engaged by, the Government on major policy matters. More than ever, we expect to "talk with" and not be "talked to" by the Government.

The paternalistic “we know what’s best for you” policy-making mindset is out of sync with our aspirations and expectations of accountability. Increasingly, consultation and feedback has to be more substance than form.

The survey underscored that Singaporeans care enough and want to have a say in how the country is run. It reflects a better educated, more informed and demanding citizenry who would like to participate in policy-making, or at least, to be heard and to be consulted on matters that affect them. This manifestation of active citizenry is to be encouraged.

Desire vs Reality

Whether through People’s Association grassroots organisations or non-governmental organisations, Singaporeans surveyed said that increased participation and involvement in society can provide actionable pathways to active citizenship. This hands-on approach is necessary to temper the self-indulgent “navel gazing” and the “me-my-and-mine” value system that is deleterious to nation-building.

The survey also suggests that there is a gap between Singaporeans’ acceptance of the norm of political participation and the very low level of actual participation. The perception of unilateral government decision-making sits uncomfortably with the desire of citizens to influence it.

If the Government does not involve the people enough, then policy-making may lose its legitimacy, and public policies may be less effective since there is likely to be less buy-in. This perception of disenfranchisement from policy-making can result in greater political alienation.

Further, many Singaporeans believe the ballot box is the only effective way of engaging the Government, and that all other modes of engagement lack efficacy. This increases the stakes where elections are concerned, since they take place only every four to five years.

Clearly, to build a nation-home requires more than just bricks and mortar, and the aspiration of a good life measured in pecuniary terms.

The writer is assistant professor of law at the School of Law, Singapore Management University. More information on the IPS Survey can be found at www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/nos_4_2010.aspx