

## Vital that diverse views are heard, say analysts

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The need to refresh the political system as Singapore's circumstances change highlighted by President Tony Tan in his opening address to the 13th Parliament last night (Jan 15) caught some political observers' eyes, as they suggested the Government could tap new approaches to better capture the full spectrum of diverse perspectives on the ground.

While they acknowledged the Government's efforts to this end, in terms of dialogues and public consultations, the analysts said going beyond these existing initiatives would go towards Dr Tan's call for Singapore to stay cohesive and move forward together.

Calling for views to be gathered from avenues beyond Government-endorsed dialogues, such as blogs, forums or civil society, former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Siew Kum Hong said: "There needs to be the recognition that disagreement, dissent and conflict are not necessarily unhealthy, as without those things, we are doomed to fail."

"If you want to be fully inclusive, bring (these groups) in and engage them on their own terms."

In the face of greater diversity of views in society, changing Singaporeans' mindsets is also important, said former NMP Eugene Tan. Singaporeans also need to be open-minded when considering different perspectives and allowing robust debate could help drive this mindset change, he added.

"(Diverse views) reflect a society that is becoming more complex ... The only way you can deal with it is for people to be able to engage in robust debate ... and not treating the differences in values as existential challenges," said the Singapore Management University law don.

Institute of Policy Studies' deputy director Gillian Koh noted, however, that a government-society partnership is not without challenges since ideas being pushed for may be driven by personal interests.

"The argument should be done with integrity and for that purpose and not with some hidden agenda ... We want shared governance, but this is the real danger of that shared governance going wrong," she said.

The experts also cited a list of other possible tweaks when it comes to refreshing the political system, including expanding the Non-Constituency MP slate and changing the selection process for NMPs.

Smaller Group Representation Constituencies could also be instituted, they said.

On the five key aims set out by Dr Tan for Parliament's new term, the political observers flagged the focus on renewing the economy as the most pressing concern to Singaporeans.

Not only will Singaporeans be keeping close tabs on how the Government rejuvenates the economy, Associate Professor Tan said they will look at how the authorities will help those who could emerge as "losers" with economic restructuring.

Dr Alan Chong from the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies also flagged the dark clouds over the economy now, citing the stock market turbulence in China and the US Federal Reserve raising interest rates.

The economy and urban infrastructure like transport are naturally closely-watched as they are tangible aspects that will affect daily lives, he added.

Assoc Prof Tan said security is also likely to be one of the Government's top priorities, given the string of Islamic State terror attacks, including most recently in Jakarta two days ago.

“(The Government will) want to assure not just people living here but people who are invested in Singapore, people who might want to invest in Singapore,” he added.