

# Can Singapore's authoritarian past pave the way for a grassroots democratic future?

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Can Singapore, whose political system has often been criticized for its authoritarian traits, become a trailblazer in deliberative, bottom-up forms of grassroots democracy?

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's recent dialogue with students is a positive continuation of a tradition that he helped cemented when he was a Deputy Prime Minister.

During the Institute of Policy Studies-Varsity Voices Dialogue on 2 July, PM Wong engaged participants by providing his view on an array of issues, including some common-sense piece of wisdom that also were broadly covered by media around the world.

"Nowadays, you have many more opportunities, and you start worrying if you are making the right choice. You start comparing with your what your friends are doing, and it may lead to a certain paralysis and a certain level of stress and anxiety. How do you decide what path to take?", the PM shared.

"My suggestion for all of you, is to start from within. Do not compare, do not ask what your friends are doing. We all have our own abilities and strengths, there is no need to compare with others to squeeze into boxes we were not meant to fit. Instead, follow your own talents and strive to reach your own full potential".

The dialogue builds on the groundbreaking Forward SG initiative that was launched in June 2022 to engage all "Singaporeans from all walks of life on how we should refresh our social compact for the road ahead".

As I wrote at the time for this column, it was ironic that the new social contract that the government of Singapore is shaping does not also include aspects related to political and personal freedoms that the city state is still lacking so badly.

It a missed opportunity because the People's Action Party could undertake a profound introspection, revisiting some its assumptions about essential liberties that are now taken for granted even in much less developed nations than Singapore.

Comparatively speaking, borrowing few terms indicating the social and economic development of a country, in terms of democracy and freedoms, Singapore, while not being a least developing nation, is surely still a developing one.

Yet PM Wong could herald a new horizon for his country by embracing stronger forms of grassroots democracy based on deliberations.

The press, while covering the event on 2 July, might have missed something important that Mr. Wong said during his speech.

"As far as the Government is concerned, we will create more opportunities for you to contribute to the common good, and to shape the character and tone of our society. We set up the Singapore Government Partnerships Office earlier this year, to make it easier for Singaporeans to partner with the Government".

This statement deserves attention because it could potentially open the door to a new era of political reform.

I am saying “potentially” because it will all depend on the political will of the new Prime Minister and his team.

It could also be speculated that, following a classic PAP’ recipe, PM Wong will uphold a “wait, watch and see” approach to understand how the “opportunities” he mentioned could lead to something bolder, bigger and even transformative.

It wasn’t unsurprising that at the IPS event, the Prime Minister did not utter a word on democracy and citizens’ rights, especially from a freedoms perspective.

As of now, PM Wong is following the script, and he is staying away from grand commitments.

Yet the Prime Minister appears to value a bottom-up way of policy-making.

Clearly, Singapore’s challenges are so daunting that finding innovative ways of consulting the citizenry has become indispensable.

In his speech before the 2 July Q&A with the participants, PM Wong added some details on how the government of Singapore intends to engage with a key segment of the national population: the youth.

“More recently, we have setup youth panels to deliberate over issues of concern to young people. We have setup four such panels, that cover issues like financial security and sustainability”.

He further explained:

“The youths on the panels that come together put in tremendous time and effort to understand the issues, and they will be given a chance to present their recommendations for improvements at an inaugural Youth Policy Forum in August. You may not have had the chance to participate in this round of Youth Panels, but there will be subsequent editions, and we welcome more of you to join in”.

This might not look like the heralding of a new political era for Singapore, but I believe that it can be the stepping stone to something bigger.

Here a scenario that I could imagine: in the next five to ten years, Singapore might be able to open up, initially very cautiously (after all, this is the PAP’s way) to some major political reforms, starting with relaxing some of the draconian legislations that are still now so much defining the city state’s way of life.

Such a gradual path of reforms might expand and turn into something really pioneering.

Singapore could not only embrace but also show the way on key principles and practices of deliberative democracy that are emerging throughout the West world actually are also part of the social fabric throughout the world.

But in order for these upcoming exercises announced by PM Wong to be really meaningful and ultimately, impactful, the PAP must “let it go”.

The party must accept that, if the youths are to be taken seriously and if it wants them to be really involved and engaged in these dialogues, then, it must also be at peace with the real

possibility that the participants might vent out some of the frustrations that the party's top echelon might, conveniently, brush aside.

Practising real deliberation on the ground will take time because, at the end of the day, it is going to be a gamble that the PAP.

Is PM Wong ready to listen to what could be defined as "problematic" complaints from the youths?

It might take time but the young generations of the city state might seize the chance and really start picking up tough topics for the PAP.

Do not get me wrong.

If the government of Singapore will come up only with a major initiative on climate assemblies because this will be one of the key demands emerging from the upcoming exercises with the young people, that would be also a very positive development.

Yet, discussing climate change, as complex as it is, is still within a safe area for the PAP.

But what if the youths will also go beyond an unspoken "red line", raising their concerns about civil and political freedoms like freedom of assembly?

What if they seriously put in question not just the issue of capital punishment but also the unjust way unjust way that is currently administered?

The PAP might be very clear on how to hold the upcoming discussions with the youths.

First it might be planning to tightly control them, guiding and directing the conversation.

Equally probable is the fact that the party will fall into the temptation of swiftly pushing back against any sensitive issues if these cases were to emerge.

Both reactions would be a mistake.

The party should ultimately accept, if it is serious about dialoguing with the citizenry, that it does not hold the monopoly on what a future compact for the nation might entail and what would look like.

A new compact might not be just about fairer wages and mental health, even though these are two paramount issues.

It might also mean a more democratic and freer society for the citizens of Singapore.

It's time the party started letting it go, and PM Wong, deep inside, knows it.