

Is there democracy in Singapore?

Opinion: A recent article by The Straits Times on a survey by the NUS Institute of Policy Studies claims Singaporeans feel the country is more democratic now. However, democracy has been eroded, with the government favoring Big Business over the people. True democracy requires freedom and transparency, not control.

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Last week, The Straits Times published an article on a survey done by the NUS Institute of Policy Studies: "[Singaporeans feel country more democratic now than a decade ago, show support for system: Poll](#)".

I hope Singaporeans, especially the younger ones, view it as propaganda than as a serious study of the state of democracy in Singapore. Otherwise, life will be even more oppressive in the future.

The article completely destroys the meaning of democracy. It shamelessly list the pertinent characteristics of Singapore and says Singaporeans view them as signs of a healthy democracy:

"...their understanding of the concept is nuanced, with a stronger emphasis on substantive aspects, such as having necessities like food, clothes and shelter for all. They also deem it important to democracy that people choose government leaders in free and fair elections, that the government ensures law and order, and that politics is clean and free of corruption."

These are basic requirements expected of any government, whether democratic or not. To suggest that Singaporeans equate them to democracy is either a reflection of their ignorance or an insult to their intelligence.

It also claims that Singaporeans "placed less emphasis on political-civil rights, such as the freedom to protest or express political views openly."

It is more likely that Singaporeans refrain from, rather than "place less emphasis", on protesting and expressing their political views, because, doing so can get them into trouble with the law or being marginalized economically.

Nonetheless, these rights are fundamental in ensuring that governments serve the public good. An enlightened government will view them as feedback; an unenlightened and corrupt one will feel threatened and suppress them.

The article then quotes SMU Associate Professor Eugene Tan, "..... the one-party dominant system has allowed the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government to socialise Singaporeans to its conception of what democracy is or ought to be, as well as the desired outcomes and how politics ought to be practised."

His observation is accurate, but he should have added that the government imposing its view of what democracy ought to be and how politics ought to be practiced, and what ought to be the outcome, is not democracy, but dictatorship.

The word democracy has been so badly abused that it has lost its meaning. By definition, democracy is government by the people, for the people. So, the policies of a democratic government have to benefit the majority rather than the minority.

In that sense, Singapore has not become more democratic in the last decade, or since Independence. On the contrary, it has become less democratic. In the 60's, 70's and 80's, Singaporeans were concerned about jobs and housing. The government listened and delivered. Policies were crafted to benefit the majority and in that sense, there was a modicum of democracy.

But since the turn of the millennium, people have been concerned about foreigners stealing their lunch and the high cost of living.

Not only did the government not listen, but has brought in even more foreign workers so that the population is now at its highest ever, despite Singaporeans not reproducing sufficiently.

Furthermore, rather than reducing the cost of living, the government has increased GST, drastically increased the price of public housing, helped Big Pharma charge exorbitant prices in the name of protecting intellectual property rights thereby increasing the cost of medical care, allowed certain businesses to chase up COE premiums unfairly, allowed oligopolies to thrive so that they can charge high prices with impunity, and crammed more than 6 million people into our small island, thereby chasing up the cost of essentials.

Did the government listen to the people?

No, instead it has pursued policies contrary to what the people want, favoring Big Business and a small group of people, while the majority continue to struggle. This is not democracy, but plutocracy – government by the wealthy, for the wealthy.

The important characteristic of a true democracy is that the people are free and independent, not being subjected to oppressive forces controlling their lives, despite living together in a body politic.

Despite Singapore being more developed now than the 60's, 70's and 80's, the people are more, and not less, dependent on the government, with it controlling almost every aspect of society. It has increased its power over the people, thereby reducing their freedom.

If the government is sincere about promoting democracy, then it should stop trying to control every aspect of society, but let the people manage them; promote transparency and awareness by institutionalizing the Free Press Act and Freedom of Information Act; let the people provide feedback openly by institutionalizing the Freedom of Expression Act and the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act; and most importantly, the prime minister and his cabinet should listen to parliament and not the other way round, as parliament is the elected representative of the people.

But the relentless effort to suppress democracy has been so successful and complete, that I fear the majority will never know what it means to be free, for the foreseeable future.