

Cherian George: GE2020's biggest revelation was people engaging PAP leaders online

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The Independent Singapore, 28 January 2021

Academic Cherian George has said that what surprised him most from last year's General Election was how people readily engaged with People's Action Party leaders over the Internet.

In a report on Tuesday (Jan 26) by The Diplomat, an online news site which is based in Washington, the professor is quoted as saying: "The biggest revelation for me, though, is how many ordinary middle-of-the-road Singaporeans – not just the politicised minority – were prepared to question and contradict PAP ministers openly online."

Prof George, who is with the Hong Kong Baptist University, added that this does not mean people were rejecting the party, but that "they expect higher levels of scrutiny and accountability".

He underlined that while "states with strong capacities" are needed, especially during crises such as the pandemic, these states do not need to "be shielded from scrutiny and criticism" in order to be effective.

When asked about what stands in the way of reform for the PAP, Prof George said: "The main reason why leaders won't reform the system is probably that they find the current situation far too comfortable." They do not have to deal with the problems that more open democracies do.

The academic's observation about the General Election is in line with a comment two days ago by Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Hazel Poa of the opposition Progress Singapore Party.

On Monday (Jan 25), at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives Conference, Ms Poa spoke of how she wants to see the country change and develop, especially in freedom from fear when it comes to political engagement.

Ms Poa said the first thing she wants to see changed is "the culture of fear in politics".

She noted that based on her experience of contesting in the GE in 2011 and in 2020, "in terms of the fear of the consequences for voting for the opposition, I find that the level of fear has decreased significantly".

However, she added that fear is very much present when it comes to running for election as part of an opposition party and that people had asked her questions regarding whether or not joining the opposition had an adverse effect on her career.

Ms Poa said: "This shouldn't have been. We should not have to worry about such things when we want to participate in politics. Responsible people shouldn't have to worry about making known their stand. Such fears make us less than we can be."

The NCMP said that she hopes for the day when such fears are no longer necessary.

She said: "I dream of a day in Singapore where powers are more evenly distributed. Where my children and other people's children are engaged citizens, participating actively and without fear in robust discussions about issues affecting all our lives, including thorny issues like racial issues which are tricky, but important."