

Having a say in Singapore 2022

IPS conducts scenario-planning exercise to seek Singaporeans' opinion on future governance

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Singapore - Imagine the following scenarios.

1) A pro-business government focusing on economic growth and ensuring better-paying jobs for Singaporeans. 2) A government formed by a splinter group of the People's Action Party providing cheap and heavily subsidised healthcare, education and housing. 3) A weak coalition government running a country whose citizens have little trust in it but where there is high venture capitalism and much community-driven effort.

One of these three scenarios could become reality a decade from now, according to a first-of-its-kind scenario planning exercise conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) which involved some 140 participants from a cross-section of Singapore society.

Going forward, the three scenarios will be presented to Singaporeans - not by way of academic papers and seminars but via an "immersive arts experience", comprising multimedia installations and exhibits, produced by theatre group Drama Box, at the National Library Building from Nov 8 to 14.

An online survey featuring more plausible scenarios will also be conducted over two weeks. At the same time, the IPS will engage groups such as trade unionists, students and grassroots leaders. The public's input will contribute to the exercise's final findings, which will be presented at a conference in January.

10 years from now

Dubbed the IPS Prism Project and led by Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh, the exercise was conceptualised in November last year.

"The whole project focuses on giving occasion to people and public leaders to pause and ponder, and think more deeply, widely, and, for some, even differently from before, about how we govern ourselves as a country in 2022," said Dr Koh.

On whether IPS plans to submit a paper to the Government on the findings, Dr Koh said they will be released publicly and "hopefully read by one and all".

The IPS decided to conduct the exercise after last year's watershed General Election - the aftermath of which saw much debate on where the country is heading, and many people had different visions of how it will unfold.

Between June and August this year, the participants, which included Nominated MP Janice Koh, Fortis Hospital CEO Jeremy Lim, prominent blogger Alex Au, and political scientist Lam Peng Er, brainstormed for plausible scenarios, driven by the question: "How will Singapore govern itself in 2022?"

According to the IPS, the starting point for all the scenarios is a global recession that the world is invariably facing, with the prospect of low growth and uncertain economic condition. The driving forces that will shape the future governance model were identified, including the public's trust of the government, value system of the society and how it defines success.

Challenging models

In the first scenario, public trust in Government is strong as its pro-business policies ensures high growth and better paying jobs for all Singaporeans. Entrepreneurship thrives, and real growth at the bottom strata occurs, with generous social support.

In the second scenario, social safety nets are strong and citizens have equal access to cheap, heavily subsidised goods such as healthcare, education and housing - made possible by tapping a larger percentage of the investment returns on the national reserves. There is a new government, formed by a splinter of the PAP. Growth, while inclusive, is low.

Dr Koh described the third scenario as "most critically, one based on self-activating and self-correcting citizens". A coalition government has been formed and there is low trust in the government after "several political convulsions arising from years of being governed by leaders who were disconnected from ground sentiment".

Foreign companies leave the country due to political instability but there is high venture capitalism and much community-driven effort.

Dr Koh would not be pressed on which scenario she thought was most probable. "The three scenarios are necessary in order to highlight the choices that confront us. So as organisers of this, we would not pick one scenario," she said.

The IPS initiative runs concurrent with the Government's Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) project, which was first announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in August.

IPS director Janadas Devan, who is also the Chief of Government Communications at the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, made the distinction that the OSC is an "envisaging exercise" where Singaporeans are invited to articulate the values they feel should guide Singapore's future, whereas the IPS project sets out scenarios for citizens to ponder over.

Dr Koh added: "Our effort is the complete opposite in the sense that it is very structured - and it simplifies, it tears things apart, it stretches things to the outer limits because we need to help people involved in it uncover their own mental models. Next, those models are challenged, gently."