

## S'pore scores well for most areas

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Laws were liberalised last year to allow demonstrations in Hong Lim Park without a police permit, while Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong signalled the Government's intention to allow citizens more opportunities for active political participation, especially online, in his 2008 National Day Rally.

Yet, if the 2008 results of an annual global survey by the World Bank are anything to go by, one wonders just how effective these changes have been in changing views on Singapore's intent to engage its citizens and provide more accountability.

For the second consecutive year, Singapore had a percentile rank of 35 in a World Bank index, voice and accountability. This measures "the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, association, and the press".

This means, of the 212 countries surveyed, only 35 per cent fared worse than Singapore in this area.

Some experts Today spoke to saw recent political changes improving Singapore's ranking in a year or two, while others feel these may not change perceptions so long as the indicators used in the survey remain the same.

This dimension of the report, Governance matters 2009: Worldwide Governance Indicators 1996-2008, has been Singapore's only black mark over the years. The study was based on the perceptions of tens of thousands of survey respondents worldwide.

The Republic has always fared exceptionally well in the other five measurements. For instance, the Republic had a percentile rank of 96 last year for political stability and absence of violence; and a percentile rank of 100 for Government effectiveness, regulatory quality and control of corruption.

Senior researcher Gillian Koh said she "look(s) forward to the results in two years time" when these experts review the current reforms, such as Singapore's introduction of Town Council reports to encourage greater accountability.

"I'm quite confident index or not, we are seeing Singapore being more open," said chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Information, Communication and the Arts, Mr Zaqy Mohamad.

For example, there has been greater transparency in the way Temasek Holdings and the Government Investment Corp have been releasing their investment results.

However, assistant law professor at the Singapore Management University Eugene Tan felt that unless Singapore "remodelled" its entire political system, recent liberalisations would not impact its ranking on such reports.

“So long as there are regulations which regulate the media ... because of the indicators they use, it's perhaps no surprise we don't fare well,” he said.

However, Asst Prof Tan advised against going on an expensive “media blitz” to change perceptions.

Instead, he suggested the Republic continue hosting important events, such as the International Water Week and Asian Youth Games.

These would draw businessmen, researchers and policy makers, who can then see Singapore for themselves, he said.