

WP targeted younger Singaporeans well during GE2020, PAP has to do better, says Chan Heng Chee

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The Workers' Party (WP) set about to appeal to younger Singaporean voters during the 2020 General Election (GE) at a time when the size of the demographic group was at its peak, said Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee on Wednesday (15 July) night.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) will have to understand this "youth peak" better in order to win back their votes, she stressed.

Speaking during an online lecture titled "Singapore in a Time of Flux: Optimism from the Jaws of Gloom", Prof Chan pointed out that the recently-concluded election saw the biggest population bulge in the age group between 25 and 35. This group would be even larger if Singaporeans aged 20 to 24 were included.

"The Workers Party understood this and chose youthful candidates and issues for the 'Zoomer' generation who prefer personal narratives and 'I feel your pain' connectivity, approachability, and authenticity.

"This online digital politics is the new retail politics – up close and personal," Prof Chan added, noting that the younger generation echoed the opposition's messages on the need for diverse voices as well as checks and balances in Parliament.

On 10 July, the PAP won 61.24 per cent of the votes cast – a sharp drop from 69.9 per cent in GE2015 – in its worst electoral performance since independence in terms of the number of seats lost to the opposition.

The WP will occupy 10 of 93 seats at the next Parliament after winning the newly formed Sengkang GRC, and retaining its strongholds at Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC. In a historic first, WP's chief Pritam Singh was officially designated as Leader of the Opposition and would be provided with appropriate staff support and resources to perform these duties.

In the GE aftermath, several top ministers have alluded to how younger voters may have contributed to the WP's biggest electoral victory to date.

At a post-GE2020 press conference, Prime Minister and PAP secretary-general Lee Hsien Loong said the GE results show the younger voters' "clear desire for a diversity of voices in Parliament".

Law and Home Affairs Minister and PAP candidate K Shanmugam – who was re-elected as an MP for Nee Soon GRC – said during a walkabout a day following the election that the government has to reconsider its approach in addressing issues of race and religion with the younger generation.

Millennials to continue supporting opposition when older

During her lecture on Wednesday, Prof Chan noted how conventional wisdom states that as people get older they become more conservative. But the view is not borne out by the research

into two demographic groups in the US, namely the American millennials – defined as aged 39 to 24 – and Gen Xers – aged 55 to 40, she said, citing a Pew Research report.

As these groups age, they retain “a distinct and increasingly liberal outlook” on many issues, unlike their older counterparts.

“So I expect our millennials will continue to support diverse voices and an opposition in Parliament... even as they age. They will have specific personal concerns too as they age,” Prof Chan said.

Singapore’s civil society scene has become more active than ever with the surge in the number of civil society organisations (CSOs) attracting “the young, the educated and the idealistic”, she observed.

Given this trend, Prof Chan suggested that the government should work closely with CSOs to improve the lives of the vulnerable and others.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that CSOs have a role to play as “an early warning system” on social issues such as the plight of abused women, the elderly poor and foreign workers even if their feedback is “unwelcome”, she added.

Prof Chan’s one-and-a-half-hour lecture was streamed online on the Facebook page of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a research centre of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The last in a series of three lectures as IPS’ seventh S R Nathan fellow, it was moderated by the NUS’ Middle East Institute chairman and veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan.

A fair political culture, disapproval of POFMA

Several long-standing issues as well as those pertaining to COVID-19 also impacted voters, according to Prof Chan.

For instance, voters disapproved of policies such as the elected presidency and how it was introduced, as well as the controversial Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), which was invoked on a number of occasions during this year’s election.

On the pandemic, the issues over the lack of clarity and micromanaging of rules for businesses too played a factor in the votes, said Prof Chan.

The last nine days of the campaign also relied on “about messaging, communicating and the online presence and savviness of the parties”.

Another observation Prof Chan made was on the emergence of a new Singapore political culture, one arising from a strong desire to see the ruling party play fairer politics when dealing with the opposition.

While the PAP may be seeking a strong mandate, political commentators have asked why it has not been more magnanimous in dealing with its opponents, she noted.

Prof Chan said critics have labelled the ruling party’s strong style of governance as paternalistic with an emphasis on a legalistic culture.

But many Singaporeans want to see the city-state evolve into a “full-fledged democracy”, she added. They want “kinder and gentler politics” based on fair rules and restraints on gerrymandering.

“Gerrymandering is what every country does but you cannot do it too blatantly. I think that has to be changed,” Prof Chan said in response to a question from viewers. “But to change the GRC system now and make it all SMCs, you're chopping and changing too fast.”

At the same time, educated and younger Singaporeans do not want to see “political overkill” taking root. “We seem to be repulsed by the competitive, mean politics of some Western democracies,” she added.

The political tools that have worked previously may not be acceptable or as effective going forward, Prof Chan noted. “With GE2020, we see a fully re-politicised Singapore.”

To deal with the challenges of a post-COVID-19 world, Singapore must make room for alternative views, she added.

The intellectual space must be expanded to give more room for expression and encourage Singaporeans, especially younger ones, to think of bold and innovative ideas.

In such an environment, “groupthink” should be seriously discouraged, especially in civil service. “If our political model needs fixing, it is how to accommodate differences and diverse views in our institutions and our country,” said Prof Chan.