

A New Singapore? Politics in the Wake of May GE



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ANALYSIS The extremely narrow - less than one percent - victory of PAP stalwart Dr Tony Tan for Singapore's presidency is yet another marker of the political transformation sweeping the island republic.

After the May 2011 polls secured the strongest opposition victory in history, with a win of a Group Representative Constituency and 40 percent of the popular vote, this month's presidential polls serves to illustrate that Singaporean politics is increasingly competitive, as 65 percent of the electorate voted for candidates not endorsed by the PAP establishment and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.



From afar, this comes as a surprise as the political transformation is taking place at an unexpected level and pace. Yet in Singapore, the signs and reasons are clear that the country is moving towards new politics - a politics of greater empowerment, democracy and ... uncertainty.

The presidential campaign was tame compared to the GE as all four candidates sought to project a dignified image of leadership. Yet behind this veneer there was intense competition along five trajectories that illustrate how much Singaporean politics is shifting.

The May GE had opened up a groundswell of issues that are not going away, and arguably have gained momentum. No question, the call for political reform is now stronger than ever and there is greater uncertainty on how to respond to this new political landscape.

Let me take each of the major changes in turn, drawing attention to the broader processes that are in many ways shattering the image of Singapore as an authoritarian country that defies the norm of greater democracy.

Singapore has indeed become less exceptional, and arguably now serves as an example of political transformation. The double whammy of two elections in less than four months and advent of social media and generational differences have created conditions for a significant rupture from the past.

1. Public accountability

Both campaigns have had at their core calls for greater checks and balances. In the GE, the call for a 'First World' parliament took hold, and in the presidential contest there was an open call for an activist 'watchdog' president. The underlying issue is that there are substantive concerns with the lack of public accountability.

The 'government knows best' attitude that has permeated Lee Kuan Yew's PAP rule is being called into question, as voters are increasingly calling for explanations of why policies are being adopted, and the need for more scrutiny and transparency in government.

While more Singaporeans continue to have a deep respect of the PAP's accomplishments, the age of paternalistic government is over, especially among the young, as they reject the nanny attitude of the past. The calls for checks on government extend from the social media netizens to those within the system. In a system where questioning and challenging is not acceptable, this is a radical move.



The demands of public accountability from a variety of polls are being driven by those not attached to the government, private property owners, those who have career options, especially independent professionals, and a core anti-PAP collective that extends its roots from Operation Cold Store in the 1960s which undermined the left as a political force to more current authoritarian measures associated with the 1987 ISA arrests, which Tony Tan was seen to be associated with.

Most of those core opposition supporters of former Singapore Democratic Party candidate Tan Jee Say would comprise this group. He won 25 percent of the vote, securing third place. Others voted for the softer anti-PAP alternatives.

This call for accountability has gained momentum in an unprecedented manner.

2. End of strongman era

At the same time, there are many Singaporeans who do not want radical change. They appreciate the deliverables of the PAP and see the country's successes.

Make no bones about it - there are many successes of Singapore's government in terms of governance and economic development. The country stands out for model of development in many ways. Much of this has been associated with the country's statesman, Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), the premier strongman in Southeast Asia (along with Dr Mahathir Mohamad, of course).

LKY is the one of the few remaining of a dying breed globally and regionally. Yet, he is from a

bygone era, one in which he no longer controls the reins of power where the political system is more diffused.

His follow-me-and-accept brand of politics is passé, especially among the young who do not connect to the parent-child politics of the past. The PAP now has to deal with a grown-up electorate, and in essentially fielding a candidate of the LKY era - Tony Tan (*photo in blue shirt*) was LKY's chosen successor - they were asking for trouble.



The PAP as a party has to evolve to a new period without LKY-type automated support from the electorate. Singaporeans are no longer looking towards the past; they want a better future and leadership that understands their role in the future. The main obstacle for the PAP has been one of connectivity to such new outlooks and ideals.

The old PAP guard continues to believe that Singapore is driven by materialist interests and fails to understand the impact of post-materialist values and ideals. Development has brought about Singaporeans who are genuinely and deeply concerned with social issues and the environment, in which a model of development driven by numbers in the fiscal reserves and growth performance do not cut it any more.

3. PAP factionalism

The PAP's engagement with the electorate has been the most problematic. Follow-me is not acceptable as the society has moved towards the need for explanation. Yet, the dynamic is not just about the rejection of talk-down dynamic, but a real sense that those elites connected with the PAP are disconnected.

Sheltered by bodyguards, Tony Tan and many in the PAP leadership engage the electorate as observers rather than participants. With whopping salaries that make the average income of Singaporeans - whose real wages have not risen in years despite increases in salaries for leaders - they do not understand the struggles that ordinary Singaporeans face, from crowded transportation systems to finding funds to deal with a medical crisis.

Many a moment I have witnessed the conditions of the elderly in particular, as I often recall an elderly woman only able to afford the bones of a fish to make a soup at a local supermarket. The elite rule has multiplied in almost cloning fashion in which the PAP only appoint the elites they can relate to, and systematically a corporatist system of divided rule has evolved.

Tony Tan is part of the PAP-LKY elite. While it is unfair to characterise him as completely disconnected, his personality and his ties to the system created a gap, one in which the majority of Singaporeans rejected.

In this discussion of the elite, it is important to understand that the elite-grassroots division is not just one in society, but within the PAP itself. From the May polls, PAP divisions have surfaced

publicly but no more than in the recent contest. Tan Cheng Bock (*right*), who came in second, represented the grassroots faction in the PAP, one that ironically was accommodated in the LKY and Goh Chok Tong eras, but was not able to thrive in the era of LKY's son, PM Lee Hsien Loong. Part of this is a product of years of elite rule, where the grassroots are no longer seen as important. Another part of this is a product of the fact that the party in its evolution has lost track of the grassroots completely.



Both are serious mistakes for the PAP as a party's evolution rests on its base not its leadership. Disconnectivity and even arrogance have made the PAP a very different organisation of the past, fueled by a leadership that is less consensus-based than earlier periods.

The end result is increased factionalism and division in the PAP. Tan Cheng Bock represented a different PAP, one connected to society. Why he did so well involved his ability to connect, something that both Tony Tan, and to a certain degree, his premier endorser lack.

The long and short of it is that the PAP is now split more than ever before. When the LKY era finally comes to end, these schisms will emerge further and test whether his son's faction is able to hold on to power.

4. Middle-ground opposition

The real test will be the opposition's ability - within the PAP and outside of the party, especially in the Worker's Party and Singapore Democratic Party - to appeal to a revitalised and transformed electorate. We have seen in the past year the opposition's effort to capture the middle ground, to appeal broadly not just to the anti-PAP hardcore but to the large middle ground in the electorate.

The Worker's Party was successful in this to a larger extent than other parties. In the presidential polls, Tan Cheng Bock achieved this as he came off as soft anti-PAP appealing to reasonable questioning. He found the right tone for the middle ground to be a major contender for the presidency. It is about both style and substance.



Winning the middle ground in Singapore is about not crossing the lines of confrontation, and criticising nicely. It is also about following and pointing to issues that need attention, almost like the analogy of the second driver - one that does not really slap but poke. Tan Cheng Bock was Mr Nice Guy, a man who was reasonable, or at least portrayed as such compared to the media caricature of the opposition candidate Tan See Jay.

This was not just about a general appeal, but one that involves engagement with non-Chinese Singaporeans. Like the Worker's

Party, SDP-aligned Tan See Jay (*right in photo*) had a problem of engaging non-Chinese comparatively.

The media portrayal of Tan See Jay did little to cross ethnic barriers as the majority of non-Chinese went either to the PAP or soft anti-PAP faction. The issue of integration in Singapore remains sensitive, as it involves not only the traditional minorities Indians and Malays (who especially feel left out of the presidency for years) but the new citizens.

Singaporeans in their choices for Tony Tan and Tan Cheng Bock opted for more cross ethnic integration, not rocking the sensitive boat of political representation. It is important to recall that the unspoken issues in the campaign were about national identity and cohesion.

A softer candidate, one at least with a system that they knew, was preferred. The points to the need for the opposition to deal more effectively with ethnic representation and outreach.

5. Social inclusion

The issues of personality and symbolism pale when one brings in the heart of the debate in Singapore, the output of government.

Singapore's success has been seriously dented by a dark underside of inequality and, even more problematic, inability to find a policy solution to the challenge of political reform to a welfare state, couched of course in Singapore as the social safety net.

The focus remains on the poor, but it is based on limited distribution, and there has yet to be a serious rethink of whether the models based on savings are working. No real consideration of wage growth, revamped policy implementation, downsizing of constricted rules-based systems and a sense of charity rather than genuine need have evolved. The groups left out are angry, although many of them continue to be tied to a system dependent on the state.

What the PAP does not fully appreciate is that they are only seeing the surface of discontent. Younger and richer voters, those socialised in different ways with different patterns of independence, are speaking out, but the class from below, the ones that work until they are 80, night shifts and look at the foreign talent and workers with a sense of displacement are only now politically awakening. When they rise further, even more change will come.

Uncertainties ahead

There are some important new features of Singaporeans that have emerged. There is no question that voters in Singapore are more engaged.

The myth of apathetic Singaporeans is long gone, as all of the voters who went to the polls did so with a fierce love of their country and a passion for a new better Singapore. They also question their leaders with increased sophistication. The LKY follow-me era of politics is long gone.

Where the uncertainties arise are in the political institutions,



namely the political parties to adjust to new conditions. Foremost is the PAP, with splits and leadership issues looming. The opposition on its part is faced with the difficult challenge of mirroring the PAP to reach the middle ground. This challenge is compounded by ethnic outreach.

Finally, the policy process and reforms need a serious rethink. Premier Lee Hsien Loong's National Rally Speech tinkered with a system that is not cutting the grade to address social inequality and imbalances.

As the new Singapore evolves, the changes are coming fast, but in measured ways through windows such as elections. The next one is long down the road, but the evolution of the system in parliament and opening of discourse will not go away anytime soon.

It remains to be seen whether there will be a conservative backlash to the democratic openings or further adjustment. My bet is a combination of both, but given the fact that Singaporeans are increasingly finding their voice ... change will continue.

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