

Singapore's democratic opening

Bridget Welsh | May 6, 11 1:54pm

COMMENT Singapore's 2011 general election campaign has been historic, and signals a major transformation in the country's political landscape. The intensity and tone of this campaign has been unprecedented as the ruling PAP's (People's Action Party) record has come under attack.

Given the impressive management of the 2008 global financial crisis and record GDP growth of 14.5% in 2010, this election should have given Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (*left*) a strong mandate and seen as a celebration of Singapore's success.

Instead, from the first day of the campaign when thousands thronged Hougang Stadium to attend an opposition rally organised by the Worker's Party, the PAP has been on the defensive.

A few days ago, the Singaporean premier, in a brave and unprecedented display of humility, apologised for the mistakes of ministers and failings of his government - repeatedly. This move represented an acknowledgment that all is not right in Singapore and that the concerns of many Singaporeans are not been adequately addressed.

In fact, the mood on the ground in Singapore has been one of angst, sometimes anger, as this general election campaign has stirred a revolutionary outpouring of open criticism towards the PAP.

Bold opposition campaign

As the campaign began, the focus initially was on the credibility of the opposition. The opposition - comprised of a handful of parties - is unified in their focus on the PAP, with only one of the contests a three-cornered fight. The minimal infighting bolstered the opposition's chances.

All the seats were contested, except for the group representative constituency of Tanjong Pagar, the constituency of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. There, the opposition candidates were disqualified for filing their papers 35 seconds late.

Singapore's opposition has made a bold move to move its old stalwarts Chiam See Tong and Low Thia Khian from single-member constituencies - single candidate contests have been whittled down in size through the repeated gerrymandering that happens before every election and is announced only a few months in advance - to the larger group representatives constituency (GRC) where there are four to five representatives contesting.

The opposition fielded arguably its strongest slate in Singapore's history, featuring the talented Chen Show Mao (*left*), a lawyer of international fame, and former private secretary to Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Tan Jee Say.

While many of the opposition teams are not even and there is considerable variation in the candidate caliber nationally - which is also the case for the PAP - the opposition has neutralised the PAP claim that it is the only one capable of representing Singaporeans.

The focus has centred on the 'A Team' contest in Aljunied (a GRC that represents the heartland of Singapore), which was won narrowly by the PAP in 1997, and is seen as the strongest possible chance for the opposition to break the monopoly of the PAP on GRCs, which comprise the majority of seats and essentially assure the PAP a two-thirds majority.

From the onset, the opposition presented the majority of Singaporeans with an alternative choice. In giving more Singaporeans real choices at the polls this election, the opposition has helped expand democratic space.

Seeking voice and representation

Time and again, the opposition used the analogy of the "co-driver", calling for the need to have more review of the single dominant party to check mistakes and share alternative views.

Speakers at rallies have pointed to the need to "slap the driver if he falls asleep and talk to him when he is awake", to open up dialogue with different perspectives and stop the government from going in the wrong direction.

This image - which captures the experience of many ordinary Singaporeans who feel that they have not had a seat in the car, let alone the front, has reinforced a key theme of this campaign - is used to illustrate the need to have a genuinely representative opposition.

To neutralise this, the PAP changed the composition of the Parliament before the polls to include more nominated members of Parliament (NMP), to allow for approved and chosen alternative voices.

With the driver analogy, the opposition has attacked this practice, pointing to the need to have voting members on all matters involving governance. This idea of having a check on power has taken root, with calls for a First World Parliament with different perspectives, and more openness in dialogue.

At the core of the opposition calls for a stronger watchdog role are real concerns about the lack of adequate consultation on policies, such as the construction of two casinos over considerable protest and lingering anger, and need for more transparency in the PAP government.

The attitude that "government knows best" is being fundamentally challenged by the demand for the government be more accountable and consultative. There are real questions being raised by the failure of some PAP ministers to be accountable for mistakes in areas such as the escape of suspected terrorist Mas Selamat, for example.

The high salaries of PAP ministers (and bonuses) have continued to come under attack. Underscoring concerns about accountability is a perceived growing distance of PAP leaders from the concerns of ordinary public. Many speak about the first visit of a PAP member of parliament in their lifetime during the campaign, revealing the lack of connection to local communities of many ruling elites, especially to those living in the government HDB flats.

The recent Facebook chat by PM Lee shows how disconnected the PAP has been from online social media, which has expanded discussion and engagement in Singapore.

Issues and governance

The opposition has tapped into the perception of PAP elite distance effectively in its messaging.

Firstly, the opposition as a whole, led by the popular Workers Party and newcomer Reform Party, has come to the centre, appealing to the middle ground. Traditionally the opposition in Singapore has been marginalised and discredited, and often painted as existing on the fringe.

The surprising dimension of this campaign is how the opposition as a whole has unified under a more inclusive group, capturing the concerns from bread-and-butter issues to political freedoms, all under the "opposition umbrella". This unity and shared message has minimised differences among the component parties.

Where the opposition has hit hardest is by tapping into the struggles of ordinary Singaporeans. The dominant concerns have been the high cost of living, affordable housing and accessible healthcare. These issues have become common rallying cries for the opposition, and forced PAP ministers to go on the defensive.

The intensity of the public response to these issues highlights the shortcomings the PAP has faced in policy-making. Behind these issues is a reality that not all Singaporeans have shared equally in the success of the country.

Singapore - along with Malaysia - has one of the highest levels of inequality in Southeast Asia. Today there are homeless on the streets of Singapore despite its impressive economic growth, and many hardworking families are being squeezed by inflation - especially those taking care of elderly parents and children.

From a policy perspective, Singapore has to face the reality that its social welfare system is not working and that many of its people are falling through the cracks. And, everyone in the small country like Singapore, sees it.

Personally, I have seen the struggles of the elderly in hospital grappling with unmanageable health costs, as the refrain that is commonly stated in Singapore is that you can die, but you cannot fall sick in Singapore.

This problem by the way is not unique to Singapore as the recent health-care debate in the US has shown. The ability to live a life with dignity and basic affordable health-care is a demand worldwide and developed countries are being called on to provide better policies.

What has happened in this campaign is a questioning of the narrow economic focus of policy for the elites and a challenge to the development model of trickle down benefits without an adequate social safety net. So many people talk about the "pressure" of living in Singapore, which has been tied to intense competition to perform in a system where there is no protection for the weak and diversity in performance.

No matter what happens in the final results tomorrow, Singaporeans have unselfishly called on the government to look out for everyone, not just the few.

Immigration a hot-button issue

Most of the media attention this election has centred on the issue of immigration. In some ways, it ties into the pragmatic concerns of Singaporeans, who are concerned with competition with jobs and the increased demand on services that have strained quality output.

Civil servants who have traditionally operated with personal care and attention have been overwhelmed by the level of new demands in recent years. This is most obvious in public transportation, but extends to all walks of life.

Yet, as a foreign worker in Singapore who fondly remembers the Singapore of old, there is more going on than pragmatic concerns. The entire demographic of Singaporean society has changed, and many Singaporeans feel that they are being left out. They resent the perceived favouritism given to foreigners, who are not asked to make the same level of sacrifice in the form of National Service for example to the country.

In this deeply proud country, the influx of foreign workers has fostered a sense of displacement and in some ways been seen to undercut national identity. This was captured by the commentary of 26-year-old opposition candidate, National Solidarity Party's Nicole Seah (*left*), who remarked that she was "living in a foreign country".

This is not an easy task for the PAP to manage the need for labour and investment with changing identity and interests. The speed at which the demographic change has occurred without adequate appreciation and acknowledgment of the important role of Singaporeans from all walks of life has made this issue very real.

This election campaign points to the need to move beyond thinking about governance in economic terms, but moving toward a broader sense of humanity and inclusion.

Engaging the new media

All of this has played out on the social media. As the campaign has been scheduled during student exams, it has been less viable for many working families to attend rallies. Instead, many have turned to Facebook and YouTube, as speeches have been shared and discussed.

PAP leaders, such as George Yeo and Vivian Balakrishnan, have made personal appeals to voters, especially younger voters who will be decisive in this election as they comprise 25% of the electorate. This is Singapore's first 'new media' election and the level of engagement is unprecedented. Even the mainstream media have adopted more new media tools.

While many continue to rely on the *Straits Times* and other arms of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) for news, the level of dialogue has deepened. What is important that much of this dialogue has largely focused on real issues rather than character assassinations, although there has been a fair amount of "he said, she said".

The real change is that Singaporeans - largely seen to be apathetic politically - have stepped up and shown that they are attuned to developments politically in their country and they care. Across the political spectrum and backgrounds, Singaporeans have been shown that they care about the country's future.

By law, they are required to vote and more and more are going into the voting booth having experienced a broader range of debate.

Obstacles and political opening

The obstacles to winning seats for the opposition in Singapore are high. These are well-known - constituency delineation, media control and lack of resources.

In this campaign, the opposition has defined the debate and provided a real challenge to the government. The issues are now on the table and will have to be addressed, from inequality and inclusion to policy reevaluations, irrespective of the final outcome in seats.

Minimally, the PAP faces a likely loss in popular support and not emerge with as strong a mandate as the past. As to how many seats it will lose, it is too hard to call but chances are we shall see the strongest opposition gains since the 1991 election.

The main groups that will determine the election are younger voters, middle-class voters who comprise the silent majority that largely did not attend rallies and importantly, the Malay community, which has traditionally voted for the PAP in recent elections and been decisive in hot seats in the past.

The PAP's initiatives in the last stages of the campaign - the Facebook appeal to younger voters, the repeated apologies and more frequent speeches in Malay - reveal how close some of the contests are. They have embraced humility as a tactic, combined with the reminders of their successes and a call by minister mentor not to have to "repent" by voting for the opposition.

Today is the cooling-off period - a day for reflection. In this campaign, Singaporeans have shown confidence in themselves by allowing and encouraging discussion. This has been led by both sides of the divide as democracy is expanding in Singapore through dialogue and greater political engagement.

Voters in Singapore will decide tomorrow whether to continue with the incumbent dominance - to reward the ruling party for the impressive economic gains and management of financial crisis - or to opt for diversity and change, a stronger check on the monopoly of power.

The global and regional trends toward democratic openings suggest that even Singapore is not immune from change. They have already shown that even in

arguably one of the most successfully governed states in the world, the demand for greater representation and better governance lives on.

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