



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 118 | June 23, 2011

Soul Searching Singapore's 2011 General Election

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Bridget Welsh, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Singapore Management University, explains that in the recent Singaporean general election “[v]oters engaged the campaign in an unprecedented manner and in the process reshaped Singaporean politics. Broader opposition support is now part of a new Singapore, one in which the PAP will have to transform to maintain its dominant position.”

The effects of Singapore's May 7th election are still being felt in this global city state. When the results came in, the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) had marked its worst performance since independence, losing 39.9% of the popular vote and a record six seats out of 87 in one of the country's most competitive elections. Two weeks after the election, the cabinet was completely transformed, as eleven out of fourteen ministers had been replaced and the PAP's first two premiers, Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, resigned. To date, one major review committee has been set up to assess government policy regarding ministerial pay. More reviews are expected, as the incumbent party grapples with responding to an awakened electorate that sent a clear message—change.

On the surface, these results should not have happened. The PAP government achieved a record 14.5% GDP growth last year and successfully navigated the 2008 financial crisis, maintaining Singapore as an attractive financial center and regional hub. Economic performance and stability have underscored PAP's political support, and in these areas they continue to excel. Based on past performance, the PAP should have had smooth sailing. Singaporeans moreover have historically been portrayed as politically apathetic, reinforcing the “exceptional” quality of Singapore, where the expansion of the middle class and economic development has not been associated with greater democracy. Yet, in this election, voters engaged the campaign in an unprecedented manner and in the process reshaped Singaporean politics. Broader opposition support is now part of a new Singapore, one in which the PAP will have to transform to maintain its dominant position.

This campaign was driven by issues rather than personalities, with debate focused on the cost of living, affordable housing and immigration. Bread and butter concerns were seen as paramount, feeding the perception that material considerations shape Singaporean voting behavior. In fact, this was not quite the case. These issues were proxies for a soul-searching national reflection on the direction of the country. Those that focused on inflation were as concerned with the widening income gap and the stagnation of wages especially among lower income families. Considerable attention was given to those who are left out of Singapore's economic success, including vulnerable populations such as the elderly. Concerns over affordable housing illustrated the hurdles younger families face amidst rising costs, and signaled the need for the PAP government to intervene more effectively to address inequalities. Reports have highlighted increased xenophobia in Singapore, which is also an inaccurate reading. The anti-immigrant sentiment was shaped more by concerns over higher demands on social services and infrastructure from an influx of an estimated one million new residents in under five years than a negative view of newcomers.



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The tone of the campaign pointed to the continued challenge of integration in Singapore. Behind these issues were real concerns about the direction of where Singapore is going. From the beginning of the campaign, these issues put the PAP on the defensive. To understand Singapore's new politics is to appreciate the deep commitment of Singaporeans for a better future for their country. This bond united PAP and opposition supporters alike. The election served to build national solidarity, while simultaneously sending a clear signal to the PAP that its mold of politics is outdated. The PAP is being called to move out of its narrow focus on economic growth and adopt more inclusive social policies, to incorporate more soul and re-strengthen its moral legitimacy.

The other election driver was more support for checks and balances. Polling during the campaign reported that a majority of Singaporeans saw the main opposition party, the Workers' Party, as credible, and the results showed that more voters were willing to put the opposition into parliament. What the six opposition parties lacked was name recognition, quality candidates and media exposure. Nevertheless, there is now greater openness to alternatives within Singaporean politics than ever before.

The question is why did Singaporeans move away from the trusted PAP incumbent? Many point to a growing divide between the PAP elite and its grassroots base. There is a sense of inflexibility, a lack of empathy for everyday challenges in a system where people are expected to follow and be talked at, rather than genuinely engaged. In an era where globally people are being heard like never before, it is not enough just to rely on an elite cadre with blind faith. With the opposition fielding highly qualified candidates, many seen as accessible, the argument that the PAP was the best slate was challenged. Analysts also point to the emergence of different sources of information, highlighting the social media and the internet as mediums for alternative discourse. There is also the role of the youth, Generation Y, as having a more liberal outlook supporting alternatives and demanding a more responsive PAP. Combined, these factors all influenced results.

There is more going on, however. The era of strong man politics in Singapore is ending; a phenomenon that has already affected other countries throughout Asia. This brings a de-alignment toward the PAP as a party, with more focus on candidates and issues. The PAP brand no longer sells like it used to, as the electorate has become more discerning, weighing a variety of factors when voting. Ministerial performance, personality and credentials associated with individuals account for the variation in the results, and foreshadow the increased obstacles that the PAP will face in maintaining support. Leaders will now be called on to deliver more tangibles for voters, and not just point to growth numbers. Singapore is not alone in the increased demands being placed on governments where jobs, housing, healthcare and social services are part of this new paradigm.

Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong did increase his own voting share in this election, and he made some tough decisions to put in his own team, including the fourth generation. He called for change within the PAP, starting with a public apology for government shortcomings two days before the election. His humility and bold changes in the composition of the cabinet have gone a long way, serving as an example for those in his government. However, given the conservative and elite backgrounds of many of the PAP leadership, the changes needed to broaden engagement will have to be quite revolutionary. The easier track is one of policy reform, an arena where the PAP is more comfortable. Yet the problems of inequality, exclusion and integration are not easy to address. Here the ideas of the fourth generation are especially important, to move the country toward maintaining itself as an example in governance. In its efforts, the PAP needs to find its own soul. This election showed that the PAP needs to wake up to the new reality and touch base with an awakened Singapore that wants and deserves more.