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## **Singapore General Election 2015: Opposition's Need to Re-Strategise**

*By Saleena Saleem*

### **Synopsis**

*The PAP's nearly 10 percent point increase in popular vote from the 2011 general election is as much a reflection of the electorate's rousing endorsement of the existing government as it is of the opposition's continued failure to speak to the majority of the people.*

### **Commentary**

THE SINGAPORE opposition parties' overarching call to the people, regardless of the specifics in their election manifestos, had been on the value of having enough opposition members elected into office to build a base for sufficient checks and balances in government, and to contribute alternative voices toward more robust policy-making: 70% of the electorate roundly rejected that call to the incredulous bewilderment of the rest of the nation.

The opposition is left at a loss, unable to adequately explain why it has failed to build on its seemingly 2011 breakthrough when it won the highest number of parliamentary seats since the country's independence. Notwithstanding the structural and institutional challenges faced by the opposition, its ability to win in future elections will rest on its willingness to recognise and accept the electorate's voting proclivities; and perhaps more importantly to re-strategise with a party (or an alliance of parties) that is capable of competing with the PAP at the political centre where the majority of the people is.

### **Electorate's utilitarian approach to the opposition**

The ground was especially sweet for the PAP: the passing of Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and the SG50 celebrations reminded Singaporeans of its humble beginnings, and how far the country has progressed under the PAP-led government. The PAP government had also taken pains to respond to certain hot-button issues raised during the 2011 general election with policies aimed at cooling property prices and slowing down immigration. And ahead of the 2015 elections, it boosted welfare spending and introduced housing grants.

During the election campaign, the opposition attributed the government's responsiveness to the presence of its alternative (opposition) voices and ideas, suggesting that more of such voices would lead to further improvement; clearly this line of reasoning did not resonate well with the electorate.

Over the last few general elections, there appears to be an emerging trend where the opposition makes ground in one election, only to lose it in the next. If the will of the people is to be considered as one of the significant factors in such occurrences, then it can be argued that the majority of people in Singapore may consider the opposition primarily for its utilitarian purposes; one such utilitarian purpose could be to signal discontent against the government and to provoke policy change.

If that is the case, the electorate would see no conflict in reverting to the political status quo of one-party dominant government once a desired change is perceived as actualised or forthcoming. This could also happen if the electorate's needs change in the period between elections; for instance, a weakening economy might influence the electorate to strongly endorse the existing government, preferring its familiar and trusted hands to guide through troubles, rather than introduce new elements into government that might reduce its cohesiveness and risk hindering its efficiency.

### **Electorate's perception of ideational differences**

When the electorate is partial to such considerations and vote accordingly, it is likely that the majority of the people do not necessarily appreciate or believe there is an intrinsic value in ensuring a continued presence of alternative voices with its consequent diversity of ideas in government. The notion that "truths" will emerge from the competition of ideas is a concept entrenched in liberalism.

In the political contestation arena, the different voices compete and through the process of scrutiny and discussion, some idea emerge dominant and gain credence while others are rejected. In government, this process is meant to lead to well-thought out policies because there are as many different ideas about proposed policies as there are different voices that are examined and deliberated, then accepted, adjusted or discarded.

However, Singaporeans have become accustomed to treating differences in ideas and perspectives with mistrust, and in some circumstances, it is even perceived as something threatening. This collective perception was likely fostered during the country's early years through the process of forging a common national identity where ideational differences were discouraged in the public sphere.

For a developing nation focused on maintaining socio-political stability for economic growth that was likely useful, but for a developed nation seeking to move to the next stage, it is limiting. But so long as the majority is unable to appreciate that there can be value in diversity of ideas at the societal level, it is not going to be able to subscribe to that notion at the political level.

### **Absence of a centrist opposition party**

One can think of the electorate as being distributed in a bell curve, with approximately 68% of voters falling within one standard deviation from the mean. A centrist party that caters to the needs of these voters can be sure not to lose at the polls. Centrist parties are not bound by ideological constraints, so even as they respond to the needs of their base voters, they are also able to shift to the left or right as needed. In Singapore, there is only one true centrist party – the PAP – and it is virtually guaranteed of continued dominance so long as there is an absence of political challengers at the centre.

For the most part, the opposition parties in Singapore cater to voters on the flanks of the bell curve; some use a language rooted in social liberalism, others in social conservatism. A few of the issues raised by the opposition come from a principled stance – such as civil liberties, governmental transparency, checks and balances. While these are important considerations for the democratic health of the country, they are not issues of priority for the majority centre.

Even when hot button issues of the majority centre are addressed, the opposition's treatment of it often times fall to the minority flank. For example, Workers Party proposed zero percent immigration if resident population growth is at 1 percent, even as the PAP took pains to explain why calibrated immigration was more reasonable for the economy.

The emergence of a centrist opposition party does not mean opposition parties with particular interests or ideologies that appeal to voters at the minority flanks have no place in political

contestations. However, their electability would likely be dependent on their ability to forge alliances with a centrist opposition party. In the long run, such a development would be good for democracy in Singapore – it could even lead to a stronger PAP as it would have to compete with a more serious political contender.

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