

Strategies of the PAP in the New Era

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Singapore's economic strategy had been the common goal and top priority in the last 50 years. To many, any failure in Singapore's economy will likely lead to the weakening of the PAP. So economic development will continue to play a pivotal role in the PAP's core strategy. Of equal importance are race relations. Meritocracy and equality for all races remain important and there is a compelling need to maintain racial and religious harmony at all levels. Recent political reforms have led to the further sharing of power and to a more consultative governing style.

SINGAPORE CELEBRATES 50 years of self-governance in 2009. One of the remarkable achievements of Singapore during this short time was its leap from a third world country to a first world standard in 30 years. What have contributed to the success and development of Singapore in the last 50 years? What are the challenges ahead? How should Singapore prepare itself for the future? These are important questions as we are moving forward to quite a different new world from the past.

Many things last for more than five decades – countries, large corporations, civic organisations, etc. But ruling political parties, through legitimate and fair elections, are usually not among them. One of the exceptions is the People's Action Party (PAP) which has governed Singapore continuously since 1959. There have been many studies

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done to understand the success formula of the PAP government and one such study is done by a non-Singaporean.

Dr Henry Ghesquiere is an economist from Belgium. He has studied Singapore for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for many years. He highlighted three reasons for Singapore's success in his book, "Singapore's Success – Engineering Economic Growth". Firstly, he says that Singapore has an integrated approach to government, with policies and cultural values, institutions and political dynamics reinforcing each other. Secondly, there is a distinction between basic principles and core functions, and their applications. This is merely a polite way of saying that Singapore strikes its own path, oftentimes an unpopular path which does not follow the political fashions of other countries. Lastly, he talks about leadership, and the importance of this factor for continued success.

These factors should be used as a framework to present the PAP's strategies for the future as it is useful to see these as forces that shaped the PAP in the past and helped it retain legitimacy today and for the future.

Firstly, an integrated approach is necessary, and indeed the goal for many countries. But at the heart of this approach must lay an important national goal that most people can agree on. In Singapore's case, its economic strategy had been the common goal and the top priority in the last 50 years. In the eyes of many, any failure in Singapore's economy will likely lead to the weakening of the PAP. So, economic goals and development, which have secured Singapore's past successes, will continue to play a pivotal role in the PAP's core strategy for the new era.

Secondly, and crucial to Singapore's continued success in the economy, is the social harmony of the country. In Singapore, with its many races and religions, the fact remains that racial and religious faultlines will continue to exist for many years to come. There is a compelling need to maintain racial and religious harmony at all levels of the society and between various ethnic communities.

At the policy level, this is seen in the many measures which have been put in place after the 9/11 bombing. IRCCs or Inter Racial Confidence Circles became a small but important part of living in multi-racial Singapore. IRCCs were set up to tackle people's fears and get the racial and religious groups to know each other better.

This was after the arrest of some 34 members of Jemaah Islamyah, a terrorist network which wanted to stir up racial strife in Singapore and Malaysia and turn both into a part of an Islamic caliphate in South East Asia. With more than 200 million Muslims in the

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Southeast Asian region, any attempt by any group using Islam as a religious front for subversive activities has to be taken and dealt with very seriously.

While building up trust on the ground, the PAP government also tightened its security policies at the top. A year later, PAP's Party Chairman Dr Tony Tan relinquished his Defence Ministry post and became Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence, in addition to being Deputy Prime Minister.

Today, the CEP or Community Engagement Programme has been strengthened at grassroots level to reach out to more Singaporeans. The importance of the CEP is evident in Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's officiating at the recent Orange Ribbon event organised by Central Singapore CDC. He reminded Singaporeans once again of the importance of racial and religious harmony, a point he has been making in the last 50 years.

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Dr Ghesquire says Singapore has core principles, which it applies as the situation warrants. What then is the political principle of the PAP? There are a few, of which meritocracy and equality for all races are very important, but there is another which may be overlooked. This is its belief in the sharing of power.

Take the recent spate of changes to the Parliamentary system as an example. The PAP government has made the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) a permanent scheme; it has also reduced the average size of GRCs and increased the number of opposition MPs (elected MP and NCMP)

to expand the political space for opposition and alternative views.

The recent political reform is a demonstration of the general attitude of the party that is willing to put in place policies to share power. The PAP has what sometimes could be thought of as a foolhardy attitude in this aspect. Take, for example, the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) scheme introduced in 1984, which gives the "best loser" in a General Election a seat in the House.

Then six years later in 1990 there was the Nominated MPs scheme, where representatives from interest groups such as unions, social services, arts community, professionals and small businesses can have their concerns aired in Parliament and give inputs to the policy making process.

It was part of a broad range of changes, stemming from a vision which the PAP Government painted in 1984, and which led to the introduction of Non-constituency MPs, and the establishment of GRCs and Town Councils.

Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in his speech at the second reading of the Amendment to the Constitution to allow for Nominated MPs on 28 November 1989, said: “Although the PAP has done its best to persuade the best to serve the country, there are always Singaporeans who can contribute but who are not able, or prepared, to take part in elections and look after a constituency... Nominated MPs, unlike Opposition MPs, can concentrate on the substance of the debate rather than form and rhetoric. They do not have to play to the gallery. They can be constructive while dissenting, thus contributing to good government.”

These changes to share power would be considered foolhardy by parties in other countries – who would want to lose their grip on power by sharing it? In recent political reforms, these changes have been even more entrenched in the political system.

But these changes are necessary, as part of the political evolution that comes with a country that is changing and progressing. In the late 1980s, as Singaporeans become more educated and more aware of what they wanted in their local communities, the PAP government began to give them more say. In June 1988, the Town Councils Act was passed, under which the Housing and Development Board (HDB) would hand over the running of all the HDB housing estates to town councils by 1991.

Each ward had a town council, headed by its MP. This not only involved local community leaders in taking decisions on municipal matters, but also compelled residents, at each general election, to think about whom they want to be their MP – since it impacts directly on their living environment.

In 1997, Community Development Councils (CDCs) were formed. Today there are five CDCs, each headed by a mayor and made up of grassroots leaders, volunteers, VWOs, etc, from the community. The CDCs have taken over some of the functions from the Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports, such as the disbursing of public assistance funds. It also works with the Ministry of Manpower to help residents find jobs.

The recent political reforms are part of a whole framework of policies to share power further.

Some would say that these schemes are a mere dressing up – that they give the form of political participation without giving it a true political soul. Others would say that they were a mere vent for the release of pent up emotions and frustrations that would otherwise boil over.

It is not known if these views are true, but it appears that the policies to share power are a defining part of the PAP. The rationale was part of a more consultative governing style initiated by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in the early 1990s and the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has evolved it further in his vision to create a more inclusive society in Singapore.

The last factor is a part which confounds people to try to study politics as a science – leadership. It also presents an interesting dimension to the issue of legitimacy.

Sometimes, doing the right thing does not make you popular – but how can you be unpopular and still have the support of the people? When you speak for the people, do you say what you think the majority want to hear or do you say the right thing which may be unpopular?

To retain legitimacy, a political party must stay true to its political goals and vision, even in the face of overwhelming odds. The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 which had resulted in the unintended independence of Singapore served to illustrate this point.

When Singapore joined the Malaysia Federation in 1963 after a referendum, the PAP was pushing for a democratic, non-communalist Malaya. The ruling UMNO in Malaysia argued that this was akin to removing “special rights” from the Malays. There was a clash of political ideologies between the two parties. The UMNO was not prepared to have the PAP, which appealed to Indians and Chinese alike, to replace the

Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which posed no danger to its dominance over the Malay votes. So what the PAP saw as the right principle for nation building had created political tension during the period 1963-1965 when Singapore was part of the Malaysia Federation.

Dr Goh Keng Swee, former Deputy Prime Minister, the pioneer architect of Singapore’s economy, wrote in the 1960s: “There can be no genuine political stability...if the people continue to think in terms of Chinese, Malays, Indians...instead of being Malaysians. For so long as this racial concept remains in the minds of the people, so long as political opportunists exploit racial feelings to achieve political ends, this will invariably lead to racial strife and political instability.”

The PAP stood, and still stands firmly, for racial equality, and refuses to compromise. It was forced to separate from Malaysia on 9 August 1965, despite being in a very poor position – the trading port had no industrial

base, unemployment was rising to 14 per cent. There were two million people who were poorly educated and hungry for food, work and housing. In 1966, out of the ashes of the 1964 race riots, S Rajaratnam, another founding leader of the PAP, wrote the national pledge by which all Singaporeans promised to be “one united people, regardless of race, language or religion.”

Leadership is sometimes thought to be a matter of good fortune – which leaders are born and people count them as they count their blessings – where there is ignorance of

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the circumstance which led to them and of the blessings to come in future. But that is not the PAP way. Since independence, PAP has had two changes of the guard.

In the 1992 by-elections, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew handed over the party leadership to Goh Chok Tong. By then, Goh had been Prime Minister for almost two years. The by-election was in Marine Parade GRC – the first by-election fought in a Prime Minister’s ward – if he lost, the country would have lost its leader.

Goh defeated his opponent soundly and took over the leadership of both the party and the country with a new mandate.

The second changing of the guard was far less dramatic. A short, bald statement to the press stated that on 12 August 2004, just after Singapore’s National Day, it would have a new Prime Minister in Lee Hsien Loong. The stock markets barely batted an eyelid.

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Yet precisely because there are no assurances, PAP ought to try and mitigate the risk. The PAP is a dominant political party but it does not have a monopoly of ideas. Singapore is such a small country, it would be a waste not to tap every single bright mind, to consult every single community and to weigh every issue on the table.

This turns on the strength of the sharing of power, a new “consultative” style of governance through consultative and participative processes and avenues such as NMPs, NCMPs, CDCs, government’s feedback channel – REACH, etc. Among them, the NMPs and NCMPs have high signature and impact as the 18 of them have direct access to participation in parliamentary debates. If these ideas are presented by people with no real power, they would be indeed mere form without substance. But if these ideas are the subjects of parliamentary debates, in the full glare of the media and public eye, there can be no doubt that they will be taken seriously.

So Singapore has come a full circle and back to the integrated approach. Once Singapore decides what it stands for – prosperity, justice and equality – then the government’s job is to make all these elements, such as policies, politics, cultural and social values, grassroots engagement, political evolution and the renewal of leaders, work together for the good of the nation and the people. ☐