

Poll Results in Singapore: Old Continuities and New Challenges

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VIGNESH RAM, OCT 2 2015

The election of September 2015 brought the People's Action Party (PAP) headed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong back to power in Singapore. It was held based on a snap poll that called for an early election, much before the mandated deadline of 2017. However, what came as a surprise was the gain that the PAP had made after the record low it had acquired in terms of popular vote share since the 2011 elections. The PAP was able to regain the Single Member Constituency (SMC) seat of Punggol East that it lost to the Workers' Party (WP) in the 2013 by-elections. Many political commentators attributed PAP's lacklustre performance in the aftermath of the 2011 elections to key governmental policies such as increasing the number of foreign workers and raising the salaries of ministers. Other issues like the rising pressure on basic infrastructure facilities also played a significant role in relatively diminishing the party's popularity among the public.

Regaining voters' trust (60.1 percent in 2011 to 69.9 percent in 2015) and seats has re-established PAP's mandate. In 2011, Prime Minister Lee highlighted that the elections marked a "distinct shift" in the political landscape and that many desired to see more "opposition voices in parliament to check the PAP." Therefore, the reversal in the mandate in 2015 provides an interesting analysis of Singaporean voters' sentiment and the state of politics in the city state.

To examine this trend there needs to be an understanding of the Singapore model (economic) and the imperative of sustaining the current political structure. In contrast to its neighbours, Singapore adopted a more open model of economic development – a free market economic structure and export promotion practices including the use of its strategic geographic position to develop the country as a trading hub in the region. This allowed the city state to not only become one of the most prosperous countries in the world but also emerge as a role model for development, so much so that the city state's developmental model also served as an inspiration for China during the reign of Deng Xiaoping when he unleashed a string of reforms (opening up the economy).

However, Singapore has also maintained a high level of centralisation in terms of the political structure with a virtually absent opposition. Some analysts in the past have also insinuated the use of political vendetta against the opposition party members through legal means; while the media has been kept under strict control, often resorting to self-censorship. Besides, there is limited space for public dissent. However, the ability of former PAP critics including Chee Soon Juan and Kenneth Jeyaretnam Son of J B Jeyaretnam (one-time fierce opponent of Lee Kaun Yew) to contest in the elections points towards changes in the political system, but the underlying problems of electoral politics still haunt the country. However, a deeper understanding of Singapore as a Confucian state provides a reasonable defence for the state of affairs in Singapore politics. A peculiar aspect of this model is that the western style democracy interacts with eastern style traditions of state order and discipline, which seem to contradict the state's role and freedoms in the strictly western liberal democratic sense. Hence, in the age of globalisation, Singapore's shift to "Asian values," as Lee Kaun Yew put it was rather disadvantaged and thus, led to change in the outlook of the country's ruling polity.

How does this dynamic affect Singapore's politics and the future of democracy in Singapore? It is a simple equation in which the state turns to its "root" values and the PAP has indicated this in a number of instances. While the bottom-line relies on the one-party state, to maintain a classical orderly society with equal distribution of freedoms for all, the

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western notion of a “welfare state,” which Singapore moved away from in the initial years of its founding, seems to be finding its way into state polices. This is a big departure from the country’s fundamental political culture, in which Lee Kaun Yew famously echoed that “everybody was born with a porcelain rice bowl with which to feed themselves and if they broke it, it was ‘your bad luck’, if it’s yours and it’s porcelain you will look after it.”

The move towards social welfare and simultaneous pressure of immigration pose the biggest challenges to the PAP. This has triggered a shift in policies by which social welfare issues, especially benefits for the elderly due to a rapidly aging population and taxation of the rich have been emphasised in the 2015 budget. This has led to the budget being termed as a ‘Robin Hood’ budget by some analysts. The taxation policy is particularly important because Singapore has remained one of the most competitive economic centres in the Asia-Pacific region, due to the various provisions it has created for attracting business and investments. Hence, the forces of change, both old and new, and the flow of immigration and cheap labour to maintain competitiveness have resulted in a social dilemma for the PAP in retaining the model famed for developing the country. However, this resentment is not embodied in the voting patterns, which seem to endorse the PAP’s bid to stay in power.

An analysis of the overall voting patterns in the last three elections held since 2001 (until the current election in September 2015) throws light on the changing voting patterns in the country. In the percentage of the votes casted per seat contested by the PAP, it has never been able to reach the 2001 level of 75.3 percent of the seats. In 2001, it won all but two seats of Hougang and the Potong Pasir that it lost to the Workers’ Party (WP) and Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) respectively in two successive elections of 2006 and 2011. However, when a larger number of seats were contested in 2011, the WP was able to clinch Hougang plus the Aljunied Group Representational Constituency (GRC) (6 seats) on vote share basis. Therefore, the biggest takeaway from comparing the 2015 results with the 2011 ones is that the opposition parties had gained in vote share percentage between 2001 and 2011; and that the 2011 campaign had been astutely planned by the WP. Hence, the loss of key constituencies in 2015 for the candidates of the party reaffirms the mandate of the PAP, barring the claims of gerrymandering that the WP claimed remained central to the problem of electoral politics in the country. However, the issue did arise in 2015 when analysts warned that there needed to be more transparent declarations of how electoral boundaries are drawn, why changes are made and on what basis.

In conclusion, it can be said that Singapore’s politics is in the process of evolution where the existing system is seeing a gradual change in its outlook. Globalisation factors such as newer emerging competition from cheaper markets are likely to stimulate further change that could possibly pose a challenge for the ruling party in terms of balancing domestic preferences and developmental priorities such as attracting more migrant workers. Therefore, a shift in the voters’ sentiment back to the PAP helps understand the fact that the Singaporean electorate prefers an old hand at the game rather than trying newer alternatives. However, an increasing average support for the opposition parties, mainly the WP indicates that there can be a possibility of exercising the alternatives if there are no proper deliverables, as experienced in 2011.

The death of Lee Kaun Yew definitely ended an era of politics in Singapore, in which the PAP leadership was mentored by the veteran politician. Nevertheless, incidents such as that of teenager Amos Yee, underscore the need to give more consideration to opening up of democratic space. Democratisation is a comprehensive exercise and providing more democratic space helps to reaffirm the faith in the ruling polity and the people. The mandate of the PAP enables it to bring about a positive transformation that avoids any further fallout in terms of the democratic duty it is entrusted with. Therefore, no fault can be found in the victory of the PAP. In fact it could incite “soul searching” within the opposition parties, which in turn could give shape to a stronger opposition strategy in the future with the evolving trends in the society. In short, the people’s mandate allows the ruling party to gauge the shifting trends and create a more free, transparent and democratic society that the citizens of the city state demand.

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