

Little time left to fix trouble spots

PAP govt has only 2-3 years to next GE; but are expectations realistic?

By Robin Chan Assistant Political Editor And Charissa Yong

TIME may be running out for the People's Action Party (PAP) Government to fix issues that people are unhappy about, said Nominated Member of Parliament and Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan.

Just two to three years remain between now and the next general election, and the PAP Government has its work cut out for it when the second session of Parliament begins in May, he added.

Panellists at a Straits Times round-table also pointed to how voters continue to hold the PAP to higher standards than the opposition and predicted that the ruling party's winning margin may well thin in future.

Beneath the ticking clock to the next polls, which must be held by January 2017, lies the bigger question of whether the electorate's expectations are realistic in the first place.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said Singaporeans still expect the Government to be paternalistic in terms of material provision and security, but less so when running the country. He summed this up as a situation of "a citizenry demanding what the Government could not reasonably deliver considering the trade-offs, while entrusting the Government with less power than it had".

Professor Eugene Tan said transport infrastructure, for example, cannot be put in place overnight but the "anger quotient remains high".

Observing that the next general election "promises to be the watershed election", he predicted that the stand-out issue would be immigration - "the mother of all issues in our political landscape". He traced complaints about transport, housing, cost of living and national identity to immigration.

Workers' Party (WP) chairman Sylvia Lim said one issue that still needs to be addressed is inter-generational poverty, as she has met families who appear "stuck in the poor category".

While she noted the work done by the social sector, she said that a more focused plan to uplift families and help children to have a better life was needed.

Looking further ahead, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser and PAP MP Hri Kumar Nair said winning margins at the ballot boxes would get slimmer.

As Singapore's democracy matures, Mr Nair sees it probably heading the way of the United States, where President Barack Obama beat his Republican opponent by 51 per cent to 47 per cent of the popular vote in the 2012 election.

The PAP won 60.1 per cent of valid votes in the 2011 General Election.

"There's a very good chance that as our democracy progresses, the margins will become thinner and thinner," the MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC said.

They were among five panel members of the Straits Times round-table last Wednesday, which discussed a recent ST survey on key election issues and their progress since the 2011 GE.

A narrow margin, however, has risks, Mr Nair warned, as there was a higher chance of a swing bringing an opposition party into power.

"So it is all the more crucial that we hold the opposition's feet to the fire because as the margins become very thin there will be a ... possibility that an election will actually see a swing. And if it swings, people want to be assured that the new party coming in will have the capability to lead," he said.

Prof Tan Ern Ser said that for now, the opposition was still enjoying a honeymoon period and thus judged by different standards from the PAP. "In the future, it could be that both parties are expected to score 90 per cent. But for now, the passing mark for the PAP is 90 and 60 for the WP and other opposition groups."

Mr Nair and Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh also pointed to looming tough national conversations on public finances and universal health-care insurance.

Singapore's social policies need to be funded somehow, said Mr Nair. It already takes close to the 50 per cent of net investment income allowed under the Constitution to help pay for social spending, he added.

The decision to spend this portion of the returns from investing the reserves had been made in 2008 after a debate on how to raise Singapore's revenue to fund its social policies. Singapore is due again for another difficult debate on raising revenue sooner or later, said Mr Nair.

How to fund MediShield Life is also a debate looming on the horizon, said Dr Koh. The universal health-care insurance scheme, of which details have not yet been announced, may well see a change from today's status quo of the young paying less while the old pay more.

Said Dr Koh: "Maybe the young will have to pay more because they can actually afford to pay more before they grow old.

"It's tipping the balance from today, when the young pay less and the old when they are 65 suddenly find (they're paying insurance premiums of) \$1,600. And I'll be watching how that debate happens."