

Taking the pulse at half-time

The Straits Times invited a panel of three Members of Parliament and two policy research scholars to discuss the findings of its survey of people's perceptions, midway through this term of government. They were joined by about 30 participants from the universities, civil society and private sector, who questioned the panel on checks and balances, single seats versus GRCs and how non-bread and butter issues like gay rights and freedom of speech might affect future polls.

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By Andrea Ong*



A section of the audience listening to the panellists during the Q and A session of the discussion at the SPH News Centre. Seated (clockwise from right) are Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, Nominated MP Eugene Tan, Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim, Straits Times assistant political editor Robin Chan, who moderated the session, People's Action Party MP Hri Kumar Nair and Dr Gillian Koh. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

WHILE there has been progress on several policy fronts since the last General Election, panellists at a round-table discussion organised by The Straits Times this week were divided on what this signifies for the second half of this term of government.

Singaporeans' confidence and optimism that things would get better in the future is "encouraging" and reflected in the findings of a recent survey commissioned by the paper, said People's Action Party (PAP) MP Hri Kumar Nair.

But other speakers such as Nominated MP Eugene Tan said the Government has its work cut out for itself when Parliament reopens next month for its second - and likely shorter - half term.

"Certainly the Government would have been expecting a better report card from the survey respondents," he said. "Put bluntly, I think time is running out."

Mr Nair, however, pointed to a trend where respondents had confidence levels of above 50 per cent in Singapore's future across six out of seven policy areas. Their confidence was also higher

than their assessment of whether the Government has improved its handling of these policies since 2011.

Even in transport, for which respondents gave some of the lowest scores in rating how the Government has done, 39 per cent feel the Government has done better or much better but 53 per cent are confident or very confident in the future of the system - a difference of more than 10 points.

"There is assessment of how their lives are being affected now, but there is also a realisation that not all problems can be solved straightaway and also an appreciation that things are being done that will lead to better outcomes," said Mr Nair, who is an MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC.

Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim said she was not surprised that respondents generally feel the Government has improved its handling of issues such as health care and housing. Since the 2011 GE, the Government "has very visibly been paying attention to social issues and has been saying so", said the Aljunied GRC MP.

Housing, for instance, has seen tangible progress. Ms Lim and Mr Nair said they now see fewer cases of first-timers facing problems getting a flat - a result of the ramped-up supply of Build-To-Order flats and the delinking of BTO prices from the resale market.

The MPs disagreed, however, on the progress in housing for other groups. Mr Nair noted the Government's moves to allow singles to buy BTOs and help divorcees with housing, while Ms Lim highlighted the difficulty that remains for those who exceed the income criteria for rental flats but cannot afford to enter the open market.

Attention to these groups

HOWEVER, the panellists singled out two groups that will need special attention: the swathe of respondents who stayed neutral on several questions, and the middle class, sandwiched generation.

The large neutral group suggests that Singaporeans are still not passing judgment yet, said Associate Professor Tan. "That could mean that the Government still has a lot to fight for."

Ms Lim said it was a very healthy development that the electorate "want to make their own assessment after the facts are fully known and the programme is fully implemented".

One area of uncertainty is in health-care costs, she said. Some 34 per cent of respondents did not commit on whether they feel confident of paying for health care in their old age, while about 30 per cent were neutral on whether they support MediShield Life and the Pioneer Generation Package. Both policies have not kicked in yet.

Hence, said Ms Lim, while the Government has announced these two major policies and said that it will look into taking on a bigger share of medical bills, "we're not too sure right now of what it actually means in dollars and cents".

People are also concerned about medical inflation, which might still result in them paying more even if their share of the bill becomes smaller, she said.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser of the National University of Singapore also flagged the middle class, sandwiched generation as a group to watch. The ST survey found that those aged 35 to 44 tended to be most negative about issues like health care affordability.

But while this group will be helped by policies such as the Pioneer Generation Package, it will take time for the effect to reach them, said the Institute of Policy Studies' Dr Gillian Koh. She said the Government has to be clearer in signalling the policy intent and benefits that people stand to get.

Foreign workers and transport

ON THE other hand, the two areas that respondents were most dissatisfied with - foreign workers and transport - create anxiety across all age groups.

On foreign workers and immigrants, just 38 per cent had confidence in Singapore's future in this issue, while only 26 per cent felt the Government's handling of it had improved since 2011. Still, it was seen as less important to respondents than other policy areas such as the elderly and housing.

Dr Koh said the issue is not about foreigners per se but inflation and accessibility. For instance, whether locals feel housing prices are being driven up or whether they are being crowded out at polyclinics and hospitals.

It is thus a "cross-cutting issue" that threads through and interacts with many policy areas, "so managing those other areas would certainly take temperature off the foreigner question".

Prof Eugene Tan said many citizens' worries can be traced to immigration, "the mother of all issues in our political landscape".

He predicted that it would weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of voters and candidates, come the next GE.

Mr Nair sought to put the foreign worker influx in context.

During the global financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, people all over the world lost their jobs, homes and hope, he said. But the Government dipped into its reserves for the first time to fund schemes like the nearly \$5 billion Jobs Credit Scheme, which saved Singaporeans' jobs and prevented property prices from crashing, said Mr Nair. Singapore was one of the first countries to emerge from the global recession.

To sustain the momentum, the Government created jobs and grew the economy. Foreign firms came, along with foreigners who filled positions that Singaporeans could not. "There was a huge credit side which no one wants to talk about," said Mr Nair.

But since Singaporeans did not feel the harshest effects of the recession and hence "no sense of loss and redemption", the credit just felt like business as usual, he said. The debit, however, could be felt in pressure points such as infrastructure strains and transport.

Mr Nair also gave handouts to members of the audience describing what the Government has been doing over the decade to help the low-income, long before the 2011 GE. It is also investing in infrastructure with measures such as increasing the bus supply and building up the rail network, though the latter will take longer.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, who was in the audience, said transport - which 45 per cent said was the Government's worst failure since 2011 - is the "only area where we've not seen radical (and) fundamental changes in policy". He asked if certain "dogma" on the Government's part might have contributed to its poor performance.

Is progress enough?

HOWEVER, Prof Eugene Tan noted that progress does not necessarily equate political success, a point that Ms Lim also raised.

"There is an implied assumption in this survey that perhaps the way voters view policy progress or lack of progress will determine how they vote," said Ms Lim. "While we do talk about all these policies and how they might affect the election, in the end how people really vote...could be affected by other things."

She cited three factors that can play a part: the national mood, the mass media's influence, and the fact that "people do change their minds during the election campaign, and sometimes even at the very last minute".

Prof Tan Ern Ser pointed to the disconnect between what citizens expect and what the Government can deliver.

His reading of the current situation: "A government out of its comfort zone and unable to quite meet the expectations of Singaporeans, and a citizenry demanding what the Government could not reasonably deliver, considering the trade-offs, while entrusting the Government with less power than it used to have."

At half time, the score card speaks of progress made and citizens' optimism for the future, but with a question mark over the effect this will have on the political fortunes of the PAP government.

Said Dr Koh: "I think the Government will need all the time to the end of the term, to get the performance up, for people to really feel that the changes have mattered and that they have made a difference in their lives."