

What will have biggest sway in next election?

Will need for checks and balances trump record on good governance?

By Leonard Lim Assistant Political Editor

AROUND this time last year, I was scrutinising property prices on a near-daily basis, visiting new condominium launches, and getting regular SMS updates on the market from a property agent friend.

But after several weeks, I decided to put on hold for the time being the plans to buy my first property. Prices, even in the suburbs, were around a million dollars for a small two-bedroom apartment and clearly out of my reach.

My interest died off, and I did not visit a showflat, property launch, or property-related website until earlier this month.

A report that home prices were continuing their downward trajectory in the wake of several rounds of cooling measures caught my eye. My checks showed that prices in the neighbourhoods I was keen on had dipped sufficiently for me to seriously consider entering the market. My interest reignited after a year of staying on the sidelines, I have been scouring websites and property launch advertisements more regularly now.



Like myself, two in five Singaporeans also find it easier for first-timers to own a home now as compared to 2011 when the last General Election was held, according to a survey commissioned by The Straits Times and published last week.

The survey of 500 Singaporeans, aged 21 and above, also found that many chose housing as the Government's biggest accomplishment since the election.

The raft of measures to cool the property market and ramp up supply had obviously resonated with at least a section of the population.

The housing issue was among several national ones, including the elderly and the poor, that a majority in the survey also felt the Government had handled better since the 2011 GE.

I found myself wondering, however, how much of such effective policymaking would translate into votes at the next polls, from the findings in another part of the survey.

Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of different factors when choosing their Member of Parliament. The highest number of Singaporeans - about 85 per cent - said that national policies (such as housing) and their impact are "important" or "very important".

Coming in second was a candidate's attributes, which 84 per cent said was "very important" or "important".

Close behind was the need for checks and balances and more alternative views in Parliament. Some 79 per cent picked this.

What struck me, though, was that some 35 per cent said the need for checks and balances was "very important" - more than any other factor.

This desire figured prominently in two Institute of Policy Studies surveys conducted soon after the 2006 and 2011 general elections as well. It emerged as the second-highest issue of concern for voters on both occasions, after "efficient government".

A question to ponder as Parliament prepares for its second session - which will kick off on May 16 with the President's Address setting out the Government's key priorities - then, is this.

When citizens go to the polls in the next election, which must be held by January 2017, what will have the biggest sway over them when they cast their votes?

Will it be how well the Government has worked to deal with bread-and-butter issues, how efficient and effective it has been?

Or will they be attracted - and eventually influenced - by ideals, of wanting more political plurality in Parliament?

Whether the Government's efforts will translate into votes, and help the People's Action Party (PAP) claw back the ground it ceded to the opposition in the last election, will hinge on the tension between these two factors in a voter's mind.

On the Government's part, it is clearly working hard to resolve problems that have surfaced in recent years - from housing to immigration and transport matters. Some policies have already yielded results, as evidenced by the sliding housing prices.

It is trying to keep the yawning income gap in check, through more help schemes for the less well off in society and increased social spending.

Distinctions between citizens and non-citizens have been sharpened, in areas such as housing, education and health care.

Singaporeans, by and large, recognise the efforts, based on the ST survey findings. And politicians have said that much of the work in the second half of the electoral cycle will build on the first half, especially in the area of social policy.

But the irony is that the harder the ruling party works to fix past policy missteps and forge a better future for Singaporeans, the more it may benefit the opposition.

As the pace of immigration slows and more money is poured into health care and transport, the seductive argument that it was the opposition's small presence in Parliament which helped bring about these changes will seem even more alluring - so why not vote more of us in, and see what we can achieve then?

Against this seemingly Catch-22 situation for the PAP, what is the ruling party to do? The battle to win votes may boil down to putting the opposition's track record of proposing alternative ideas and questioning policy proposals under the spotlight.

For the issue - and perhaps future surveys could reflect this as well - should be framed as not just the presence of checks and balances, but having effective checks and balances.

In a sense, the opposition's task of speaking out has been made harder by the narrowing of their ideological gap with the PAP, which has shown its pragmatism by adapting and adopting the right policy for the times.

Recent government programmes with a socialist bent - such as the Wage Credit scheme where the State subsidises a certain amount of the increase in some workers' salaries, having a wage floor by having a compulsory licensing scheme in certain industries, and universal health-care coverage - are evidence of this.

They would probably have been dismissed by PAP leaders of the past, but as Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said last year, the weight of thinking within the Cabinet had shifted from a centrist position a decade ago to one "left of centre".

Seen through this lens, the opposition's scope to be an alternative but sensible voice - an effective check and balance - has become more limited.

Non-Constituency MP Gerald Giam himself described his Workers' Party as "generally a moderate party" last year. "If you could put us on a political spectrum, we are probably left of centre. We don't seek to represent extremist views, neither do we hold extremist views ourselves," he added.

The role of the opposition in bringing to the fore citizens' worries and concerns has also been limited by changes in how the PAP engages the ground. After being labelled as out of touch, ministers and MPs have since upped interactions with residents both on social media and in face-to-face encounters. They have also taken pains to show that they are willing to listen, rather than continue with the paternalistic leadership style of the past.

As the Government continues to strive to do things in the best interests of citizens - ensuring that national policies have the desired impact, adapting to changing societal circumstances, and being responsive to people's needs - the desire for checks and balances will remain.

The responsible thing is to keep at what it is doing, and believe that voters will reward good governance when they see it.

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