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Tan K. B. EUGENE

Singapore Management University, eugene@smu.edu.sg

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Key issues that have not been addressed

By Eugene Tan K. B.

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The last nine days of hustings period have provided for a most engaging electoral campaign in recent memory. There seems to be a nascent but growing political consciousness and Singaporeans are not shy to express their political inclinations and loyalties.

On Thursday night, we saw all political parties and their candidates put forth their passion, the raw emotions, all in the final effort of persuading voters to support them come Saturday. At all 14 rallies across the island, we saw the climax of every party's last-ditch effort before settling into the uncharted territory of "Cooling Off" day.

The hustings have generally been civil. That is not to say that the rally speeches were not robust, and that criticisms were not expressed forcefully. They were.

This time round we saw the Opposition parties and the People's Action Party engaging each other from national issues to mundane (but important) municipal issues. The quality of debate has been higher than previous GEs. A better-educated electorate has, in many ways, forced the political parties to raise their game. To be sure, there were the jokes, the ridicules, the name-calling but one can say that the decorum has been good.

Probably the most famous analogy from this year's hustings is that of a "co-driver". Coined by the Workers' Party, this has imprinted a mental reference point on voters' minds vis-à-vis the type of political system Singapore should work towards. Like it or not, the metaphor and imagery of a "co-driver" slapping the driver is powerful!

But I feel some key issues have yet to be addressed. For the PAP, the issue of whether a decisive mandate won on Saturday will weaken the party's commitment to more consultation on policies that affect Singaporeans. There is a perception that the PAP government can be a lot more responsive to Singaporeans, that the party should not be so focused on economic goals such that it becomes less sensitive to the average citizen's needs, concerns, and even fears.

In fact, Singapore is changing so rapidly that the sense of displacement and discomfort is real and cannot be ignored. Singapore is home, and the voters feel that the government has to protect the home turf.

To be sure, there are global realities that we cannot divorce ourselves from but how can the government help Singaporeans to cope with change as well as the bread-and-butter issues? Will the PAP be better listeners? Will consultation and feedback be taken seriously rather than disappear into some bureaucratic black hole?

For the Opposition, collectively, they have made much hay over the need for a more competitive political landscape. That the government can do better and be more empathetic if there is more accountability and transparency. For the Opposition, the solution is to have more elected Opposition MPs.

But voters do not want Opposition MPs to be mere mouthpieces. Sure, voters seem keen to want the legislature to become a platform for the competition of ideas, as well as competing visions for the country. There seems to be an unexpressed desire for muscular and penetrating debates in Parliament. Indeed, this adversarial posture in Parliament is also seen as providing badly needed competition as well as providing checks and balances in a one-party dominant system.

This ideal of a "First World Parliament" has gained traction and resonates well with voters. It may well be a vote-winner. But voters also want their MPs to not just be their voice but also to be able to have the hands and legs and minds to run the municipal government (popularly, the town council) well. This is the biggest challenge for the Opposition: that they are not just all form but that they possess substance as well.

Going beyond the rhetoric and tapping on the strong undercurrent of unhappiness over bread-and-butter issues such as costs of living, housing, the widening income gap and immigration, Opposition parties have not adequately addressed this nagging issue of competency and capacity to get the job done in a system that is structured for the PAP.

The Opposition parties' manifestos are a lot beefier this time and come with extensive suggestions to manage the burning issues of the day. But they don't seem to address the "how" questions?

How will the plans be operationalized? How will they be paid for?

The Opposition parties have to demonstrate that their plans are sustainable and viable and will not harm future generations. Given that they do not have a track record, they need to get down to the brass tacks. Otherwise, their policy proposals will come across as being piecemeal, and designed for populist appeal.

Whatever the case, now it is the voters' turn to decide, if they haven't already, where to place their cross on the ballot paper come Saturday.

The writer is assistant professor of law at the Singapore Management University School of Law.