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Living with voters' existential angst

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comment & analysis

“ Given synchronised fiscal retrenchment in most advanced economies, another year of mediocre growth could give way to outright contraction in some countries.
NOURIEL ROUBINI • 10

THE PAP AFTER PUNGGOL EAST

Living with voters' existential angst

EUGENE K B TAN



W as the Punggol East by-election result a rough but reliable reflection of Singaporeans' assessment of how the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP) have performed since the 2011 General Election (GE)?

Perhaps. But we should be careful not to extrapolate the results as being a barometer of national sentiment.

Nonetheless, the results are a useful snapshot of the dynamic political situation. More importantly, what does it signal next for the PAP,

the WP, the Opposition in general and Singaporeans?

The PAP's performance at the polls has been attributed to the "by-election effect" in which voters, knowing that the PAP remains in charge regardless of the outcome of the by-election, were more inclined to vote for the WP to put pressure on the Government.

But this assertion about tactical voting behaviour is simplistic. It does not give sufficient credence to the unsettled ground realities and residents' actual sentiments, and how they impacted political and voting behaviour.

It assumes that voters will vote differently in the next GE — which must be held by Jan 9, 2017 — because much more will be at stake.

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True, the by-election factor and other issues would have weighed on voters' minds — including estate amenities, the stalled Rivervale Plaza upgrading and transport connectivity — but the results may very well also reflect the deep existential angst felt by a wider swathe of Singaporeans — especially among the younger, "sandwich" middle-class demographic that was represented in Punggol East.

RETURN TO GRASSROOTS

We are at the crossroads economically, socially and politically. The Singapore development model, which worked very well in our fledgling days, has to evolve with the changes in society.

“ The PAP urgently needs to connect more ... it needs to return to its roots as a grassroots party.

Economic success alone is grossly insufficient to define what Singapore is and what it means to be Singaporean. The price of our success is increasingly being questioned.

The PAP urgently needs to connect more with this existential angst, anxiety and aspirations of voters who feel a growing sense of alienation. It needs to return to its roots as a grassroots party.

The PAP must go back to being a political party in form and substance.

Living with voters' existential angst

The long years of a depoliticised polity in Singapore suggest the PAP has lost much of the art and the craft of winning the hearts and minds of voters.

In this by-election, for example, the party's rallies featured policy-style speeches — rational in signature but failing to excite or connect effectively with voters in the way the WP did. The WP also tapped deep into disaffection over lingering hot-button issues from GE 2011.

The PAP cannot just function as the alter ego of the Government. A government, primarily, has to govern and lead. It can afford to be faceless and bureaucratic.

But a political party has to be the nuts-and-bolts of walking and working the ground; it has to emote genuinely and respond to the fears, concerns and aspirations of the average Singaporean.

It has to talk with, not to, the people. It must inspire the electorate to its ideas, policies and vision.

The question for the PAP is: How?

SWING TO VALUES

If negative sentiments are allowed to fester, the PAP will continue to lose ground as Singaporeans are now less the homo economicus. Post-material concerns and aspirations are becoming more important to us.

We are shifting from being value-driven to being values-centred, even as material well-being remains important as a fact of life. In other words, even as the average Singaporean is deeply concerned with his "interests", a persistent obsession with the "bottom line" to motivate people is too instrumental. The ideals of fairness and justice matter in building trust, confidence and a sense of belonging to this nation.

The slew of policy measures to deal with the hot-button issues does not seem to have adequately assuaged Singaporeans. Sure, it takes time for those measures to show their effect and true worth.

But policy tweaks will not be sufficient, given the existential angst. The limitations of our development model require a more fundamental rethink of long-standing policies.

For example, with the White Paper on Population due to be debated in Parliament next month, it will not be enough for the PAP Government to tout that it has managed and restricted the inflow of immigrants to deal with the concerns of Singaporeans about immigration.

More importantly, what is the impact of immigration on the Singaporean identity? Do we value and nurture Singaporeans at the workplace when immigration provides an off-the-shelf solution to our demographic woes, and the desire for quick success? Is the immigration policy unwittingly encouraging discrimination against Singaporeans at all levels, weakening what it means to be Singaporean?

“The question is not whether Singapore will see more political plurality, but when that will come about.”

PLURALITY INEVITABLE?

With the big swing against it in Punggol East in a mere 20 months, will the PAP now adopt the politics of appeasement, given that the next GE has all the settings of being the watershed polls?

At the same time, one view is that no matter what policy solutions the PAP offers, voters will want a greater Opposition voice in Parliament. Can the PAP reconcile itself to the fact that Singaporeans are less enamoured to-

day with a one-party dominant system, having internalised that good governance cannot be about all our eggs in one political basket?

The question is not whether Singapore will see more political plurality, but when that will come about. The PAP can opt to be the responsible steward of that development or it can have change forced upon it.

The other reality the PAP must live with is that while it holds 80 out of 87 (or 92 per cent) of the elected

parliamentary seats, voters will continue to practise double standards in which the ruling party is held to a higher standard than the Opposition. This comes with being the only political party that has governed Singapore since 1959.

The PAP's dominance was its strength in the halcyon days of nation-building; in the next stage of our development, dominance will have to be more nuanced. The PAP has its work cut out for it.