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Post election, let the healing begin



EUGENE K B TAN

Post-material or aspirational issues featured prominently in General Election 2011. The People's Action Party's (PAP) heavy reliance and focus on its track record of delivering economic growth, or "performance legitimacy", appear to be losing lustre for Singaporeans.

The 'how' questions, which have not been asked often enough, are now taking prominence — such as how can we grow economically and yet remain united?

This election has also unveiled competing visions for Singapore's political system. The PAP sought a firm and decisive mandate from the electorate; the Workers' Party (WP) led the charge for a more competitive political landscape.

This tussle will continue for years to come — the WP, like any serious political party, will not be keen to remain in the Opposition.

But beyond that, it is time to put the differences behind and look ahead. At the PAP's media conference early yesterday morning, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: "It's time for healing and for acceptance of the people's decision, not just for the PAP but for all Singaporeans".

The electoral battle was bruising and some may say divisive, even though the hustings were generally conducted in a clean and fair manner.

What must be done for the healing to take place?

TONE AND DIRECTION

First, the tone and direction set by the PAP is crucial. It is still the dominant party holding 85 per cent of the parliamentary seats. The PAP Government will have its

work cut out in the new term.

They will have to renew trust with the people. They will have to learn to listen to Singaporeans' voices and not treat them as noises or chatter.

How will the party respond in light of its worst electoral performance since independence? Will it be populist, or will it stick by its guns and focus on how to better implement and secure buy-in from Singaporeans for its policies?

Will the party rise to the challenge that outgoing Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo said was necessary — that of the internal transformation of the PAP?

Mr Yeo's impassioned speech on the last day of the campaigning, now in retrospect his swansong, was unusually candid. He spoke of the "cry from the heart that wants to be heard", and the groundswell of frustration, anger and resentment. It was a frank assessment of the sentiments that reflected in the election results. Mr Yeo noted that Singaporeans were desirous of a government that engaged them in major national decisions; they wanted to be spoken with rather than talked at.

Now that Mr Yeo will not be able to take up the role of leading the reform, how will this immense challenge of leading change from within the PAP, as well as re-calibrating ties with the grassroots, be driven?

In his press conference, Mr Lee had said: "I think George Yeo has expressed his view. We understand in the PAP that this election is a watershed election and we have to adapt to this new situation, and work (out) policies as well as approaches which will work in this environment with this new electorate."

Indeed, the PAP must adapt to a changing political landscape and in substance not just form. A younger generation of voters may find the tried-and-tested ways of doing things uninspiring.

With the PAP's policies dominating almost every aspect of life in Singapore, any problems and unhappiness are inevitably pinned back on the ruling party.

MAKING THE BEST OF THEIR PLATFORM

Second, with a stronger presence in Parliament, how will the Opposition — the WP in particular — make the best of the platform to make more political inroads, or at least, to spur the PAP to raise its game?

Singaporeans, while believing in the need for real checks and balance, want an Opposition that is credible and they have shown their willingness to give the WP an opportunity. In Parliament, the Opposition MPs will be expected to perform their role with the same sort of courage and determination they demonstrated

during the hustings.

They will have to not just ask questions but ask better questions of the Government. The Opposition needs also to show that it can propose viable policy alternatives. It is all too easy to criticise but the great value proposition in providing alternative ideas is that will demonstrate that the realm of policy options is not confined to, and should not be defined by, the PAP's world view.

While the PAP has sought to focus the electorate's attention on its fourth generation leadership renewal, the various Opposition parties have, to varying degrees, been deliberate in their effort at renewal as well. Their performance in this GE may be an excellent advertisement for them to attract new members and supporters, a base for future good candidates.

Emotions have run high in the last three weeks. We now need to close ranks and respect the collective decisions of Singaporeans. Some of the online debates have been ugly and demeaning. We need to recognise and accept differences of views.

HARNESSING NEW AWARENESS IN A CONSTRUCTIVE MANNER

Third, beyond the political parties, how can Singapore harness this newfound spirit of civic and political awareness, in a constructive and not divisive way?

Emotions have run high in the last three weeks. We now need to close ranks and respect the collective decisions of Singaporeans. Some of the online debates have been ugly and demeaning. We need to recognise and accept differences of views.

Just as we expect our politicians to measure up to our growing and diverse expectations, we need to develop the skills and mindset of a discerning electorate. A more complex global environment, a rapidly changing Singapore and the challenges it faces will require political parties and Singaporeans alike to mature politically so that our politics will not limit our potential as a nation. ■

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