

PUBLIC LIVES

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A turning point in Singapore

Singapore held its general election last Saturday, 7th of May. But even in our politically-obsessed society, hardly anyone took notice. This indifference is understandable. Filipinos are generally uninterested in the politics of other countries, except the United States. Singapore is also one country that most people do not associate with politics. After all, this city-state has been ruled by the same party, the People's Action Party, since it became self-governing in 1959. One cannot expect to find meaningful politics in a situation like that.

But all societies evolve. And, as we are seeing all over the world, even the most tightly ruled states must sooner or later change, if they are to avoid implosion. The problem of all authoritarian societies is the same: when people are unable to freely express their opinions, the feedback mechanism is blocked. Out of fear, citizens censor themselves, giving the impression that everything is all right. Government thus operates ever more blindly, guided only by its illusions.

Singapore is no exception. Despite registering the highest economic growth rate in the world (14.5%) in 2010, its leaders could sense the simmering dissatisfaction among ordinary Singaporeans. Public housing has become more expensive, well beyond the reach of low-income groups. The latter see the growing foreign community, which now constitutes more than a third of the population, as edging them out of the nation's jobs and limited facilities. They are not persuaded by the argument that foreign workers contribute immensely to the nation's prosperity.

Globalization is certainly a factor. Young Singaporeans are heavy Internet users. They are more connected to their generation and are aware of

what is happening in the world. Despite government regulations that block websites deemed offensive, they find ways of expressing themselves on many issues facing their society.

Recognizing the importance of the political discourse that is going on in personal blogs and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, the Singapore government recently allowed cyberspace campaigning for the elections. “For the first time,” reports the New York Times, “campaign recordings can be posted as long as they are not ‘dramatized’ or published ‘out of context.’ Video taken at an election rally can be uploaded onto the Web without being submitted to the Board of Film Censors.”

By coincidence, I found myself in Singapore on election day. Campaign posters and tarpaulins were not visible in the center of the city. But the engagement of ordinary Singaporeans in this year’s general election could be felt from the first hour that the results started to come in. All the taxicabs I took had their radios tuned into the announcements, with the drivers pounding on the steering wheel in unabashed elation or dismay over the results. This continued well into the following day, Sunday, when the total votes obtained by the government and the opposition became clear.

The PAP-led government posted its lowest share of the votes since the 1965 general elections, after Singapore broke away from the Federation of Malaysia. At 60.1 percent of the total votes, this was still a decisive victory for the PAP. Winning 81 of the 87 parliamentary seats, and conceding only six to the opposition, they retain control of parliament. So, what is new?

What is new is what the figures above do not, by themselves, tell. The six seats that the ruling party lost were won by only one opposition party – the Workers’ Party (WP) -- the party founded by David Marshall, Singapore’s first chief minister. Five of those six opposition seats are for the Aljunied group representation constituency (GRC), where the government fielded one of its brightest and most senior Cabinet members, foreign minister George Yeo. An opposition slate led by the WP secretary-general himself,

Low Thia Khiang, trounced Minister Yeo's re-electionist team.

I met Mr. Yeo casually at an international conference in Singapore in April last year. He was the luncheon speaker at one of the sessions. I must say I have never been impressed listening to a government official of any country speak. But Yeo was different. Unassuming and laid-back in demeanor, he spoke without notes for about fifteen minutes, covering a broad range of issues from history to culture, from economics to biotechnology. He spoke about globalization and the future of Asia with sensitivity and optimism.

George Yeo represents the most outstanding achievers of the generation after Lee Kwan Yew, who were not specifically trained to become politicians. A Catholic in a predominantly Buddhist society, Yeo earned a first honors degree in engineering from Cambridge University on a scholarship. He rose to become brigadier general in the Singapore Air Force, and then took an MBA at Harvard Business School. A close friend of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Yeo will lose his Cabinet position. It is no small irony that this man who pledged to be the voice of reform in the People's Action party should be the main casualty of the party's perceived shortcomings.

Yeo is the kind of leader that Singapore needs most in a time of transition. He has his ears closely pressed to the global ground in which his country has to manage the contingencies of its transformation into a fully modern society. If Singapore were the Philippines, Yeo would be the opposition's best bet in the next election. But he's not a politician, and he seems, in any case, far too ahead of his country's politics.

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