By Invitation

Figuring out the right path for political evolution

Singapore needs to take a middle road of introducing gradual change and encouraging participatory politics

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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is part of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKY School) at the National University of Singapore. It is reputedly Singapore's best-known think-tank. It was set up in 1998 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who said he wanted "an independent think-tank to offer credible alternative views on government policies".

In an effort to encourage different points of view, IPS has launched a series of IPS-Nathan Lectures, delivered by the R Nathun Fellow for the Study of Singapore. So far, we have heard three of the brilliant lectures given by Mr Ho Keown Ping, Mr Bhattacharjee Kanishk and Mr Peter Ho. Both Keown Ping and Peter Ho spoke about the changing political environment of Singapore.

It is natural that Singapore's political environment is in transition. This is because we have gone from Third World to First World, and our needs and aspirations have changed accordingly. In his third lecture, Mr Peter Ho describes well how this process happens: "As government policies lead to improvements, the needs of the people change in tandem. This is explained by Marx's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's proposition was that after the basic physiological needs of a person are met, more complex psychological needs will have to be fulfilled. At the top of this hierarchy of needs is the need for self actualisation, which is realised when the individual realises his potential and transcendence, which is helping others achieve self actualisation. "So, if you accept this proposition, then after government has delivered the basic needs of food, security, shelter, transport and health, expectations of the people are going to change. In other words, the demands of the basic needs, but in fulfilling their more psychic needs in the upper reaches of Maslow's hierarchy, excluding social, emotional and self actualisation needs."

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, we have known of the desire to achieve self actualisation is to participate in the political process. As Aristotle said: "The end of politics is the best of ends." He explained that if "all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good".

More recently, Dr Francis Fukuyama has also explained the importance of political participation. He wrote: "A good political system is one that encourages the emergence of political outcomes representing the interests of a large segment of the population... Ideally, democratic decision-making should be taken conscientiously, with every member of the community consenting." Accordingly, Mr Peter Ho suggests that the government should "shift from the paternalistic and interventionist government to one that is supportive of the government, to governance with you. It is imperative for government to move towards a collaborative approach to policymaking, and be prepared to connect, consult and co-create with the people and the private sectors".

However, political change is inherently difficult. Once you start a process of change, many unexpected consequences arise. Hence, it would be wrong to think that change is easily managed. For proof of this, look at the United Kingdom. It has been trying to manage political change since the promulgation of the Magna Carta in 1215. Few countries anywhere in the world have experienced as the UK in managing political change.

Yet, even the UK can make serious mistakes. As Prime Minister David Cameron initiated a referendum on Brexit to satisfy his right-wing party colleagues. This led to the disastrous Brexit decision. His successor, Mr Theresa May, thought she could strengthen her standing with the European Union by calling for early elections. But her attempt to apply winning hand was to lose. If well-established democracy like the UK can make disastrous mistakes like these, it would be sheer folly to assume that Singapore can manage political change easily.

FRACIOUS OR CONSENSUAL?

Since political systems are difficult to change, we can start by changing our political culture. The same political system can have different cultures. The United States and the Scandinavian countries have democratic systems. However, while American political culture has been increasingly fractioned, the Scandinavian states have retained their consensual cultures.

Our current political culture has strains of both. Prof Mahbubani, who has discussed this in his book, said: "There is a need to discuss political culture. The idea is not to dismiss opposing points of view out of hand, even if they are not cogently argued. Instead, it would be useful to apply something like the "principle of charity", and consider the strongest possible interpretation of an argument. For political culture is a multi-cultural society, embracing diversity and differences. We already have a good foundation for embracing diversity of opinion."

The Government's role is fostering a more participatory political culture is equally important. For example, fractious debate is seen to have no real effect on policy, there may be no incentive for Singaporeans to engage in debate.

The Government can also choose to facilitate such debate. When Mr Ho Keown Ping spoke about the need for political debates in Singapore in his lecture, he said: "A participative political culture may need to change to a collaborative model in the future. This is already happening with the abundance of debates facing Singapore in the post-LKY period."

"However, such a governance culture of participatory democracy can only exist if the spirit of civil society can be actively engaged in decision-making. For that to happen, society civil players need access to that lifeline of robust discussion freely available and largely unregulated information.”

The key message of this column is a wholesome change about gradual political change is not easy, we must not choose to do nothing. In this regard, Singapore needs to develop its political change is that, over time, it could create a build-up of political tensions, which could lead to a media power to bring back the platform for such conversations to carry on. But while it may be easy to move towards greater openness in theory, this may have unintended consequences in practice. As we have seen in several Western societies, free speech has also led to hate speech. Singapore is not small and fragile to allow that hate speech.

As Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam said earlier: "In the UK, there is a legal process by which you can burn the Quran, attack Muslims, attack others. Here, we have zero tolerance for people who make bigoted, divisive statements. If a person makes such statements, the ISD (Internal Security Department) will ask him, and when necessary take further action. You burn the Quran, an> any other book, you go to jail – no two ways about it."

We have built something precious, fragile our precious we try hard to strengthen trust, deepen understanding between the races, religions, and reject irrelevant intolerant teachings."

"If political culture becomes more participatory, we must decide as a society what form our debate should take. We can choose whether we want to have any fractions or a consensual culture."

FACILITATING PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

Ultimately, the benefit of having an open debate on political culture is to ensure that the political culture that is most appropriate in Singapore's context. This debate would full the function of assessing the political options which have been neglected, and also demand the highest degree of excellence in discussion," he concluded.

"So how can we encourage the participation? We must decide as a society what form our debate should take. We can choose whether we want to have any fractions or a consensual culture."