Singapore's 'Accountability Election'

The opposition pitches a new style of democratic oversight, and voters seem to like it.

By GARRY ROGAN

Singapore's May 7 general election will be more competitive than usual. With 82 of the 87 parliamentary seats being contested, nearly twice as many voters are expected to cast ballots compared with the last election in 2006. The opposition is fielding more electable candidates than it has in the recent past, and is tapping into voters' economic concerns.

Yet this election is not just about government policies and performance. It is also about the means by which those factors ought to be debated. Opposition parties have campaigned heavily on the need for a critical mass of elected opposition parliamentarians to increase accountability between elections.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is more accustomed to holding citizens accountable to government than vice versa. For instance, wards that elected opposition members of parliament in previous elections, Hougang and Potong Pasir, have been discriminated against in the provision of public services such as upgrades to public housing estates—by being placed toward the end of the queue of projects, behind wards that return PAP members.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew himself brought home this point over the past week in the Aljunied group constituency, site of a particularly hotly-fought political battle between the PAP and the opposition. Mr. Lee observed that multimillion-dollar PAP plans for constituency improvements could not be expected if the PAP didn't get elected. He has warned Aljunied voters that "We accept the verdict of the people, but they must also accept the consequences of their actions. You must expect the PAP to look after PAP constituencies first." If Aljunied rejects the PAP it "has five years to live and repent."

Against these odds, opposition leaders in this election are campaigning in part on a goal of institutionalizing the opposition "as a force," in the words of Low Thia Khiang of the Workers' Party, one of two current opposition parliamentarians. This would involve winning one-third of the seats up for election. His party's slogan "Towards a First World Parliament" explicitly makes this part of Mr. Low's pitch to voters.

Significantly, the Workers' Party is connecting the philosophical issue of political accountability to discontent over economic policy. The party argues that its First World Parliament concept "ensures the government is held to account, to explain and justify to Singaporeans their decisions and policies in a meaningful way." Doing so could avoid some of the policy foibles that have aroused voter angst, such as in housing, transportation, widening income inequalities and cost of living.

The Singapore People's Party follows a similar line of attack.
Major Parties
Saturday's general election is expected to be the most fiercely contested in the country since its independence in 1965. Opposition parties collectively are challenging 52 out of 87 parliamentary seats. Review the major parties.

This is different from the PAP's vision for government accountability. While it espouses the desirability of increased political participation and regular elections, its ideal model for the four years and 50 weeks between campaign seasons is non-partisan, consensual politics. It has introduced informal mechanisms for citizens' feedback on government policies, most notably Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenship @ Home (REACH), which mainly collects public feedback online. But the government always retains the right to simply ignore any criticisms it receives through such channels, and there are few if any ways for voters to force it to respond.

Similarly, the PAP has tried to meet the demand for greater opposition voices in parliament by creating constitutional structures that give some opposition members seats at the discussion table while limiting their ability to affect policy outcomes. It has increased the number of so-called nominated members of parliament and non-geographic-constituency members and filled those seats with the highest-polling of the losing opposition politicians.

These mechanisms could land up to 18 non-PAP members in parliament after this election. But such seats are not able to vote on key issues, including budgets, no-confidence motions and constitutional changes, constraining their ability to challenge government policy. Crucially, none of these MPs has legitimate claims to political authority derived from democratic election.

From the PAP's perspective, this combines the best of both worlds: allowing the opposition to debate policy without being able to obstruct the government. Foreign Minister George Yeo, running on the PAP slate against Mr. Low in the Aljunied group constituency (the subject of Lee Kuan Yew's remarks about voter accountability), counters Mr. Low's "First World Parliament" line by saying that "what we need is a First World country, a First World government and First World political debate."

Yet this is a very narrow, and fundamentally undemocratic, view of how accountability should work. Consider how Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam warned that the opposition's talk of accountability could mean blocking the government. Mr. Shanmugam points out that the constitutional amendments creating appointed parliamentary seats for the opposition would never have happened if the opposition held a larger number of seats—they might have blocked the measures to embarrass the PAP. Yet that is exactly the point: If the opposition had won enough seats to block such measures, it would mean a critical mass of voters opposed the government's policies. The opposition would be serving the public's will.

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Meanwhile, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong argues that Singapore cannot afford a two-party system because there is not enough talent. Talented people should instead join the government, help it to make better decisions, implement good policies, and avoid making mistakes. Viewed in this way, opposition gains in talent and capacity are a cost to government.

It is a zero-sum game. This is a self-serving argument for a de facto one-party state.

Although the opposition is waging a more effective battle than it has in the recent past, translating greater support into substantial seat gains is mathematically difficult under the current voting system. But Mr. Low's promise of a First World Parliament invites Singaporeans yearning for greater democratic political accountability to register their vote accordingly. Who is accountable to whom is as much an issue as the economy in this campaign.