

SG+50: Future Trends 2065

Politics in 2065: Primal or pragmatic?

The interplay of economic and social driving forces will see more political contestation in Singapore

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For The Straits Times

The Danish physicist Niels Bohr once said: "Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future."

In discussions about Singapore's political future, the question that seems to be of greatest interest to many people is whether the People's Action Party will still be in power in 50 years.

This is not the question I will try to answer. Instead, it may be more interesting to examine the underlying forces likely to shape Singapore's political evolution over the next 50 years.

In particular, I believe there are at least two driving forces that would critically affect Singapore's politics over the next half-century.

Economy: Concentrated or broad-based benefits?

The first is whether the future economy would deliver concentrated or broad-based benefits.

While Singapore's growth in its first 50 years was remarkable – especially the fact that it benefited virtually all segments of society – there are signs that future growth would mainly benefit those with capital and the right technical skills.

The persistent increases in inequality that Singapore experienced over most of the past 15 years are, at least partly, the result of technological advances.

These advances have benefited workers in some sectors – finance and high-tech industries, for example – much more than in others. The advances in a handful of technologies – machine intelligence, the ubiquitous Internet, advanced robotics and big data – are likely to gather speed in the next few decades.

They will produce driverless cars, 3D manufacturing, speech-recognition software, machines that can translate hundreds of languages, mobile health applications that reduce the need for patients to see doctors, massive open online courses that make average lecturers redundant, and many other life-improving innovations.

These innovations will also disrupt labour markets. Dr Carl Benedikt Frey and Professor

Michael Osborne of Oxford University recently analysed more than 700 occupations and concluded that 47 per cent of employment in America is at high risk of being automated away over the next decade or two.

While it is premature to conclude that the job losses caused by these technologies will exceed the new jobs created in other parts of the economy, there is growing consensus that the future economy would be characterised by winner-takes-all dynamics. This means that small differences in performance produces large differences in rewards.

As Professor Tyler Cowen of George Mason University puts it: "Average is Over." Prof Cowen describes a future economy stripped of middle-skilled jobs and broad-based prosperity, while a "cognitive elite" of 10-15 per cent of the population prosper.

Besides the impacts of technology, the prospects for equitable growth are also likely to be dimmed by our ageing demographics.

As the population ages, the rate of labour force growth slows, and the share of labour income in the economy falls. Capital income – rents, capital gains, interest and dividend income – will take up a larger share of the economy. Since wealth is more unevenly distributed than labour income, its growing role must portend rising inequality.

There are at least two implications for domestic politics. The first is that the inequality challenge is unlikely to go away any time soon; indeed, it will probably become worse. Future governments would have to contemplate a degree of redistribution not imagined before. This won't be easy because the inequality that we will experience is exactly what we would expect from a highly meritocratic system.

When inequality is the result of a meritocracy of skills rather than of inherited wealth or privilege, it is much harder to justify why the successful should be taxed more to pay for the needs of the rest. The contest between the right and the left in Singapore – largely non-existent in its first 50 years – is only just beginning.

The second is what rising inequality would mean for political stability. It is tempting to predict that a society riven by sharp disparities in income and wealth

would be an unstable one.

While this is plausible, it is by no means a foregone conclusion. Aggressive government redistribution would lessen the risks of conflict significantly, although the feasibility of such redistribution is highly contingent on social trust and social capital.

Greater economic inequality may not necessarily lead to more instability. For one thing, ageing societies tend to be more conservative and, so, less prone to political paroxysms.

Historically, too, the link between economic inequality and political instability has been a tenuous one: mediaeval Europe was quite stable while American society in the late 1960s – the golden age of equality – was in turmoil.

Politics: More contestation

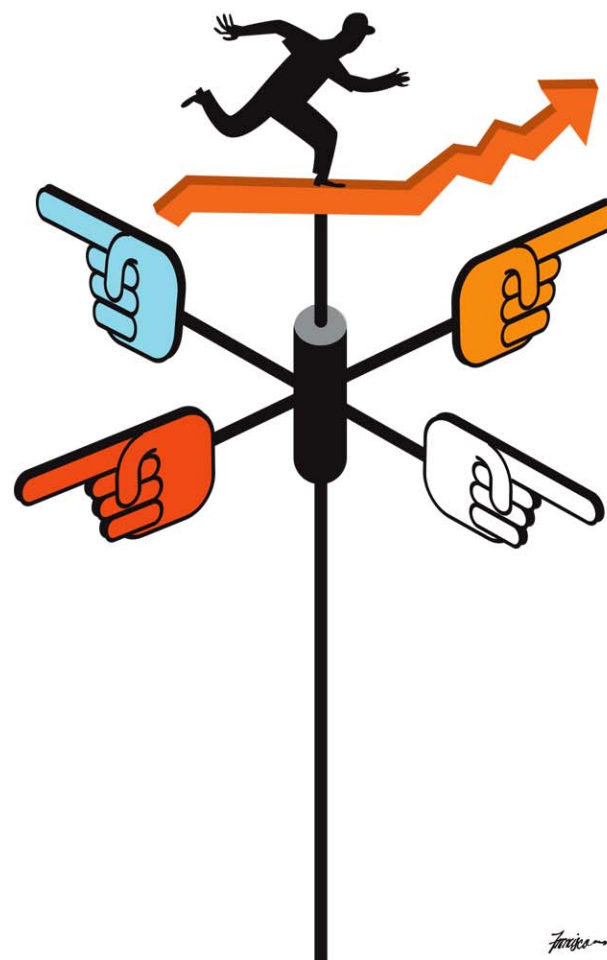
The second critical uncertainty is whether politics in Singapore would be characterised by a pragmatic search for the right policy solutions or a more "primal" contest between different value systems.

As with the increasing saliency of inequality as a political issue in the past decade, politics in Singapore in recent years has also witnessed greater contestation between social and religious conservatives on the one hand, and secular liberals and progressives on the other.

Consider the following: the attempted takeover of women's group Aware by Christian conservatives, the parliamentary debate over Section 377A and the subsequent legal challenges, the rise of single-issue interest groups, more organised efforts to improve the treatment of foreign workers and the reactions to the National Library Board's decision to remove books that it felt undermined family values.


All these suggest that politics in Singapore will see more normative conflicts and disagreements based on differences in people's values.

It is true that these issues that proliferated online and off among the middle class may not have had as much resonance among the working masses in the heartland. But it is likely that as Singapore society becomes better-educated and more exposed to social media, such debates will only intensify in



	Economic 'left'	Economic 'right'
Socially liberal	3. Traditional left-wing	2. Libertarians
Socially conservative	4. Populists	1. Mainstream conservatives

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quantity and intensity.

Greater contestation over values also reflects the fact that Singapore is now a developed country where most people's basic needs have been met.

A desire among more segments of the population to engage in the political process is simply a new reality that the Government has to adapt to.

The risk for the Singapore Government is that having become used to operating in an environment that was mostly pragmatic and insulated from such value conflicts, it cannot adapt quickly enough to their emergence.

Looking ahead, it is plausible that a sizeable segment of Singapore society, possibly the majority, remains socially conservative and continues to welcome a paternalistic, even moralistic, state

to police dominant norms and values, and to preserve the status quo on a wide range of social-cultural issues.

Meanwhile, a growing incongruence between Singapore's aspirations as a global city and its essentially conservative social-political order may produce an increasingly restless and disenchanted liberal middle class.

As evolutionary psychologists have found in recent years, people's political values – whether conservative or liberal – are extremely resistant to change.

As Dr Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist at the New York University, observes in *The Righteous Mind*: "Once people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix... They see confirmation of their grand narrative everywhere."

What this new science of primal politics suggests is that the mostly pragmatic politics of the past 50 years is probably an aberration.

What is unusual is not that these value conflicts are now emerging; it is that we have avoided them for so long. We should now expect them to become more pronounced, salient and contentious.

Political identities

Singapore's political landscape will become more complex and political identities more variegated and fragmented.

One way of thinking about Singapore's political futures is to consider how the two long-term driving forces – economic inequality and primal politics –

might interact to shape political identities in Singapore (see table). If we group people by their economic and social values, we might come up with a table like the one shown on this page.

Mainstream conservatives

At the bottom right of the table is an identity associated with mainstream conservatives, who are "right" of centre economically and socially. They prefer a government that governs in accordance with free-market principles. They are also socially conservative, preferring to have societies that are bound in tradition (think family values) and maintain the status quo. The current Government is situated here even though it has made recent deliberate efforts to move to the left economically.

Libertarians

The second position is occupied by libertarians, who believe that the state should not interfere in markets or in our personal lives. As our value conflicts become more pronounced, it is conceivable that a party which objects to state paternalism would emerge.

Traditional left-wing

This is the third political identity, consisting of those who favour a highly redistributive state and a progressive social order.

Populists

The fourth political identity refers to those who are economically left and socially conservative. They favour efforts to reduce inequality but seek to maintain existing social mores and hierarchies.

This position may combine traditional family values, a "pure" national identity that views immigrants and foreigners as threats, the marginalisation of sexual minorities and antagonism towards existing elites seen to be out of touch with the masses.

For want of a better term, I call them "populists" for their anti-elitism and the way they pander to the desire for more redistribution while tapping into primal instincts based on nationality or the exclusion of people who are different. The matrix extrapolates from what has been happening in Singapore.

To be sure, political parties and identities in Singapore can develop along different paths as interests and values shift, and as the relationship between political parties and voters evolve. But one thing seems likely: political identities will become more segmented; political parties will emerge to meet their demands.

The emergence of these competing political identities, and the return of politics to Singapore after 50 years, should not come as a surprise.

Profound economic changes – driven by technological advances and demographic change – combined with the immutability of people's values, suggest that the broad political consensus of the past 50 years may face real challenges. One of the main tasks facing Singapore governments of the future is to adapt to this more complex and contentious political environment so as to continue governing effectively.

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