

Liberal reflections on loss and acceptance in GE2015

Eleanor Wong

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The People's Action Party's (PAP) political narrative for Singapore has always insisted on our exceptionalism. For the longest time, I had suspected that this was just an excuse to impose an unnatural dominance on the populace. I had assumed and hoped that, given time, given information and given choice, Singapore would one day become a democratic society like any other – with more than one strong political party, all realistically vying for power, ensuring diversity and providing checks on each other.

But I'm big enough to admit when I'm wrong.

In the Sept 11, 2015 General Election, voters gave the PAP 69.9 per cent of valid votes, an increase of 9.8 percentage points from 2011. They handed 83 of 89 seats to the PAP. This wasn't just a national swing to the PAP. This wasn't just a vote in favour of the ruling party's policies over those offered by other parties. This wasn't even about picking the group at municipal level that best proves itself at the hustings or on the ground thereafter.

Such analyses try to shoehorn the

facts into the framework of a typical democracy. They miss the point entirely.

This was a vote confirming the type of system that Singaporeans want to live under.

Of course, the number of Parliamentary seats has not changed significantly from 2011 (when there were also six opposition seats). But, by giving the ruling party nearly 70 per cent of the popular vote, Singaporeans are essentially saying that they do not want to move towards a system where any other party has a realistic chance of taking over any time in the foreseeable future.

In fact, contrary to views at the time, 2011 was not a watershed or inflection point marking the start of an upward climb for the opposition. Rather, 2001 may have been a bottom inflection point and 2011 marked the top of the curve. If I am right, barring seismic events, the PAP's share of the popular vote is destined to oscillate (by five to six points) around the fulcrum of 66.6 per cent attained in 2006.

Singaporeans want a monolithic government. They are comfortable with power consolidating in the hands of very few, presumably in the interests of effectiveness and efficiency. They do not believe that leaders necessarily govern better if they must answer, day to day, matter to matter, to critics. They do

not generally require diversity of views for its own sake.

Singaporeans have freely chosen to be governed by an entrenched elite aristocracy. Singapore may well be the only country in the world that, offered a truly free and informed choice, has so chosen.

An aristocracy need not be of noble birth; according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an aristocracy is "government by the best individuals or by a small privileged class". By this definition, the PAP and its ruling class constitute a political aristocracy.

And regardless of what critics might say, Singaporeans this time round definitely had access to the information necessary to choose.

Social media and technology levelled any communication advantage that the PAP might have had in the past. Education and voter maturity have reduced fear as a motivating factor.

Opposition parties gave us credible alternatives and made cogent arguments why they, rather than the PAP's picks, should be given our mandate.

Singapore voters rejected these choices without coercion.

Does that mean Singaporeans don't want democracy at all?

I don't think so. But I am ready to admit that maybe it means Singaporeans do want our own brand of democracy, one that is

compatible with entrenched aristocracy.

The problem then is that the models of democracy out there (including the one we currently have) may not meet our needs.

All these models rely on a realistic chance of displacing incumbents to generate certain conditions crucial to a functioning democracy.

There are at least two such conditions.

First, having a body of "professional oppositionists" whose "job" is to provide well-thought-through alternative views that challenge and thus help refine the status quo.

Second, the strong incentive for transparency and honesty that comes from knowing that internal workings will be thrown open to external scrutiny upon regime change. It would be dangerous for us to simply assume that these conditions will be generated by our Westminster parliamentary democracy, if we consistently signal that we do not intend to check our elected political aristocracy with a strong challenger in Parliament.

If voters consistently show they are willing to consolidate the political dominance of the PAP, where, apart from elected opposition, can we build pluralism? How else can we generate conditions of transparency?

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I believe we must seriously explore how to generate these conditions in some other way. Either by strengthening existing institutions (such as civil society, the presidency, the media, the judiciary) or by creating new ones (such as an ombudsman or other mechanisms that don't yet exist elsewhere).

Crucially, whatever means we choose, we must insist that these institutions be given legal and political teeth; they must be independent from the political aristocracy, be empowered to work openly, and have direct access to the public, such that we have the benefit of their guidance whenever we head to the polls. If we then choose, in our own unique way, to endorse our aristocracy, we do so on a free and informed basis.

We need to understand what GE2015 tells us. And then we need to be brave enough, Singaporeans, governed and governors together – to imagine a system, perhaps one quite different from any other in the world, that addresses what Singaporeans clearly want, but that also protects our democracy.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer, a lawyer and playwright, is an associate professor at the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law.