Political polarisation here low, but culture, class divides a concern

Justin Ong
Political Correspondent

Studies may indicate low levels of political polarisation in Singapore, but the twin threats of class and cultural divides remain – and to tackle these deepening fault lines, the country may have to adopt a communitarian model of democracy unique to it.

Panellists at the last of a series of nine virtual forums at the Singapore Perspectives conference came to this conclusion yesterday as they discussed the future of Singapore politics against the backdrop of rising populism and polarisation around the world.

Such polarisation, however, does not seem to be the case in Singapore, and there has been little evidence of any change over time or over generations, said Dr Roberto Foa, co-director of Cambridge University's Centre for the Future of Democracy.

He pointed to a study last year by global pollster YouGov, which showed slightly more than 10 per cent of Singaporeans saying they would not be close to anyone with a differing political ideology.

But Dr Terence Chong, deputy director at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, noted the presence of an entrenched class divide in Singapore society. He said studies have shown that children from middle- and upper-class families are ensured a head start in life while their peers from working-class families play catch-up.

"It is not hard to imagine how such frustrations can fester among working- and lower-middle-class communities, making them vulnerable to populism, and the politics of resentment."

Clashes of cultural values are also on the rise here, he said, pointing to what he described as a new wave of progressive values – such as woke culture, cancel culture, cultural appropriation and heightened sensitivity to racial stereotyping and discrimination.

"Much will depend on whether we are able to put aside the things which divide us and focus on the things that we share in common," said Dr Chong.

Hong Kong's South China Morning Post deputy executive editor Zuraidah Ibrahim warned against framing such issues by using terms like "politics of resentment".

"We risk delegitimising what could be genuine sentiments of grievances faced by communities that are at a great disadvantage compared with the rest of us," she said. "We have to be careful about over-generalising certain global trends and superimposing them on the Singapore situation."

Ministry of Communications and Information deputy secretary Aaron Maniam outlined a proposal for a Singaporean-style democracy that could mitigate further divisions in society.

He suggested a communitarian model drawing on complex identities from different sources, mixed with more traditional democratic notions of protecting individual rights. This, he said, "would allow us to have a space within which disagreements can actually coexist with one another, even while we commit to a larger national project that is the future of the space and country that we all live in".

justino@sph.com.sg