



With an increasingly heterogeneous population and greater diversity of views in Singapore, public consultation will take on even greater importance ahead of major policy decisions, says the writer. Citizens expect to have their views heard and to participate in the decision-making process, so it will not suffice for the Government to involve stakeholders only in the implementation. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

By Invitation

Strengthening the middle ground

An inclusive and cohesive society cannot be taken for granted amid increasing diversity and the pull of identity politics. A strong centre is essential and must be continually nurtured.



Terence Ho

For *The Straits Times*

At the press conference announcing his selection as leader of the People's Action Party's fourth-generation team, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong alluded to the challenges of greater political contestation and the growing desire for diversity in Parliament.

Questions are already swirling about how politics and governance will evolve as the leadership transition unfolds.

In particular, will Singapore continue down the path of increasing political participation and social inclusivity? And how will this evolution affect Singapore's efficiency and distinctiveness?

CITIZENS' EXPECTATIONS

With an increasingly heterogeneous population and greater diversity of views, public consultation will take on even greater importance ahead of major

policy decisions.

Citizens expect to have their views heard and to participate in the decision-making process. It will not suffice for the Government to involve stakeholders only in the implementation – upstream deliberation, too, will no longer be the sole province of policy wonks.

For instance, the Ministry of National Development's public consultation last year yielded many ideas to address the issue of windfall gains from the sale of prime-location flats, while also clarifying the trade-offs inherent in each of the suggestions. The recently launched White Paper on Singapore Women's Development was the product of a year-long consultation process that engaged nearly 6,000 participants over 160 conversations.

A more in-depth process of policy deliberation and public consultation can seem time-consuming and inefficient. But the process can uncover policy blind spots, generate fresh ideas for consideration and refine policies before roll-out. It also helps to engender the buy-in so crucial for successful policy implementation.

IMPORTANCE OF THE MIDDLE GROUND

Forging a consensus is much easier if there is a strong middle ground

of citizens who are well-informed and committed to the national interest.

Mutual trust among citizens and stakeholders allows for difficult conversations to take place without exacerbating divisions. It is the mark of a mature society that disagreements can be articulated respectfully without denigrating those who hold a different view.

Laws and policies should reflect the tenor of society in line with majority values, without imposing a "tyranny of the majority".

There should be space for responsible public discourse and self-expression – whether on inequality, racism, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) matters, the death penalty or foreign manpower – while avoiding crippling protests or unbridled free speech that can inflame tensions between different groups in society. Stakeholders, including community and religious organisations and civil society groups, can help by exercising their influence responsibly and pursuing their interests in a spirit of give and take.

As Mr Wong pointed out at a forum on tribalism and identity politics last November, the Government can play the role of a fair and honest broker on issues that divide public opinion. This requires a government that is trusted, responsive and prepared to exercise leadership.

It is heartening that longstanding policies are being reviewed and updated as societal norms evolve. The decision to permit female Muslim nurses to wear a headscarf while in uniform was taken after a process of

consultation to make sure that both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities were comfortable with this move.

On other issues, consensus may be difficult to achieve, but it may still be possible to find a workable path forward. The Government is now consulting with diverse groups of Singaporeans to better understand their viewpoints on Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men.

FOUR WAYS TO BOOST THE CENTRE

It is perhaps a reflection of Singapore's strong middle ground that the ruling party and main opposition party are seen as fairly centrist in their public policy positions. However, this cannot be taken for granted as democratic contestation intensifies.

The experience of other countries shows how easy it is to slide into demagoguery, where politicians prey on tribal fears and pit one group against another to advance their electoral prospects. In some instances, this could take the form of divisive communal politics; in others, right-wing populism that veers into xenophobia.

The best antidote is to continually nurture the middle ground in several ways.

First, it is important to pursue both outcome and process legitimacy as the bedrock of effective governance. Singapore's leadership must continue striving to better the lives of citizens through inclusive economic growth, while upholding fairness, transparency and rule of law. Both successful outcomes and fair

processes are necessary for broad-based support of the Government's agenda, so that extreme views and ideologies are less likely to gain a foothold in politics.

Second, policies that promote social inclusion and reduce socio-economic disparity will help to prevent the emergence of marginalised communities and groups.

There is a need for economic security and social mobility to give citizens a stake in the nation, so that all can aspire to lead a fulfilling life even in a competitive, meritocratic society. Social investment to expand opportunities for Singaporeans from early childhood through to the working years and beyond is vital. So, too, are measures to raise the wages of lower-income earners, enhance fiscal progressivity and strengthen social security.

Otherwise, issues such as foreign manpower and climate sustainability will more easily divide opinion between the affluent, who are well insulated from financial pressures, and those who feel the economic impact of policies much more acutely.

Third, the Government should update policies at a pace that is comfortable for society, in step with evolving norms and values.

This is particularly pertinent to issues of conscience and individual rights, where the assertion of such rights may run against traditional societal values. Interest groups are less likely to overreach if they know their views are factored into the decision-making process fairly.

Over time, this can nourish a middle ground that is patient and open-minded, in turn expanding the space for societal consensus.

Finally, access to timely and reliable information is a necessary foundation for balanced public discourse.

Transparency engenders trust and is vital for Singapore's competitiveness as a global city in the information age. It is better to build up trusted sources of information such as an independent, responsible media rather than to rely on propaganda or censorship.

At the same time, falsehoods must be called out and debunked. This is particularly challenging, given the rise in foreign influence campaigns and social media echo chambers. Encouraging responsible and respectful debate can help to improve public understanding and strengthen policymaking.

A strong middle ground may serve as ballast, keeping the polity centred amid the geopolitical tempests that will invariably come our way. In seeking both outcome and process legitimacy, and avoiding the extremes of tribal politics and illiberal conformity, Singapore can aspire to be a "Goldilocks" polity – one that is neither too hot nor too cold, but inclusive and cohesive.

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