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.

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For The Straits Times

At the press conference, announcing the election leader of the People’s Action Party’s fourth-generation team, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong acknowledged the challenge of greater political contestsation 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 inclusion? Meanwhile, will the momentum affect Singapore’s efficiency and distinctiveness?

CITIZEN’S 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 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 windfalls from the sale of pristine-land flats, while also clarifying the truth-offer incentive against the suggestions. The recently launched White Paper on Singapore’s 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 reorient the buy-in necessary for successful public implementation.

IMPORTANCE OF THE MIDDLE GROUND
Finding 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 respectively without denigrating those who hold a different view.

Laws and policies should reflect the sense 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, LGBTQI+, disability, gender, and space (questions or matters), the death penalty or foreign manpower — while avoiding creating protection or unbridled free speech to calcify tensions between different groups in society. Stakeholders, including community and religious organisations and civil society groups, can help by exercising influence responsibly and pursuing their interests in a spirit of give and take.

As Mr. Wong pointed out at a forum on trichotomy 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 for increased leadership.

It is heartening that lengthening policies are being reviewed and updated to reflect new norms evolve. The decision to permit female Muslims 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 373A 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 central 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 the fears and phobias of one group against another to advance their electoral prospects. In some instances, this could take the form of divisive communal policies in others, right-wing populism that reverberates in Euroscepticism.

The best antidote to continuously 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. Such successful outcomes and fair processes are necessary for broad-based support of the Government’s agenda, so that extreme views and ideologues 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 fulfilling lives even in a competitive, meritocratic society. Social investment in expanded 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 pro-growth and strengthen social security.

Finally, issues such as foreign manpower and climate sustainability will move more easily with a steady and open debate between the public. The Government is well advised to stay open to new ideas and voices from the public. This will help to keep the government centred amid the geopolitical tempests that will inevitably come our way. We need both outcome and process legitimacy, and avoiding the extremes of tribal politics and liberal conformism.

A strong middle ground may serve as ballast, keeping the policy centre amid the geopolitical tempests that will inevitably come our way. We need both outcome and process legitimacy, and avoiding the extremes of tribal politics and liberal conformism. Singapore can aspire to be a “Goldilocks” policy — one that is neither too hot nor too cold, but inclusive and cohesive.

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