

Leadership Renewal and Transformation

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Watershed Election 2011

The May 2011 general election will go down in Singapore history as a year of political wakening for the ruling party that has won every election since 1959. While the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has secured 60.1 percent of the electoral votes; this was 6.5 percent drop from the 66.6 percent in 2006. This is the year that the ruling party lost its first Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) and its foreign minister that represented it. More importantly, during the election campaign period, the ruling party realised that resentments amongst a number of the 2.06 million voters were much stronger and deeper than the party has envisaged.

Shortly after the dust settled, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took swift actions to address some of the key issues brought up during the election. First, was the announcement of the retirement of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong from the cabinet followed by the retirement of the Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan and Minister for Transport Raymond Lim. All the three ministers were singled out by the electorate for various issues ranging from ill-planning of the transportation system, escalating housing prices and the poor handling of the escape of Singapore most wanted man. Then, 11 out of the 14 ministries saw a change in their ministers. Shortly after the announcement of the new cabinet, PM Lee also instructed that a committee be formed to review the ministerial pay.

These actions taken at face value are indeed remarkable steps to restore the confidence of the electorate and the right steps towards transforming the ruling party into one that relates to the people on the ground and in the formulation of national policies.

Leadership Renewal

In many countries, leadership renewal at the very top is seldom voluntarily. There are just too many examples to name. In Southeast Asia alone, we have seen the forceful removable of ex-President Marcos and ex-President Suharto from the Philippines and Indonesia respectively in the past. More recently over the past four months, the Arab uprising in the Middle East and North Africa region has attracted the parallel comparison of the fall of the Berlin walls in 1989. In many large corporations, there were also fair share of departures of chairmen and CEOs due to internal disputes and disagreements. The most recent one involved Mr Gianfranco Lanci, CEO of Acer. Then other high-profile cases included ex-Chairman Harvey Golub of AIG after feuding with its CEO Robert Benmosche last year, the resignation of Phil Condit, chairman and CEO of Boeing in 2003 and HP CEO Carly Fiorina in 2005.

Prior to the general election, PM Lee Hsien Loong spoke to students at the National University of Singapore on the topic "Leadership Renewal – the Fourth Generation and Beyond". In that seminar, PM Lee emphasized the importance of leadership succession; he noted that this was a major issue in the upcoming General Election. "We have to press hard on leadership renewal now, so that by 2020, we will have a younger team ready, not just to maintain our present high standards but take this as foundation to fly even higher and do even better," said PM Lee.

Best Candidate for the Job?

Leadership renewal is an easy topic to write but not one that is easy to implement. If you made an internet search, you will find some 22 Millions related articles on this topic alone. This is especially so for all top positions be them in the public or private sectors because many of these posts are often highly political in nature. Take the recent contest for the IMF top post that was "vacated" by Dominique Strauss-Kahn after the Frenchman was arrested and charged with sexual assault in New York in Apr 2011. Many countries in particularly those emerging nations are questioning the leadership renewal process at the IMF. Most recently, Sepp Blatter was re-elected the fourth time as President of FIFA although there were many who felt that the international governing body is managed by dinosaurs. Amongst the critics is Diego Maradona, Argentine football legend who branded Blatter as a man "who has never kicked a football".

These are but some examples that it is often not the best qualified will get the job.

Another reason why leadership renewal is never an easy transition could be due to the incumbent unwillingness to give up the power that he has amassed when in the position. According to David McClelland, the late Harvard psychologist who spent much of his career studying motivation; he noted that power motive comes in two forms: "personalized" whereby the leader draws strength from controlling others and making them feel weak; and the next form; "socialized" where the leader's strength comes from empowering people. For those in power and with "personalized" power motive would be most unlikely to want to give up the position that can influence and control others.

Moving Forward

The Singapore government has taken many steps to demonstrate its willingness to transform itself and the new cabinet lineup is one major step towards the process. How much the ruling party will truly embrace and deliver on the promised changes will be on the watchful radar of the 2 million voters.

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