Reader's intro:

The dust is settling from the General Election and the consensus of both PAP and opposition parties is that everyone's done well in the eyes of the voters.

What has their choice shown about the political maturity of the country?

To find out, Shobana Kesava spoke to several of the nation's political observers.

Voiced report:

The victory speeches and parades are done and all parties are beginning to plan for the five years ahead of them.

To do this, they'll be taking stock of their campaign and results.

These will have been a good indicator for them to make a clear assessment of the way forward.

In the first place has the electorate become more politically mature?

Assistant Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University, Eugene Tan

11. tan if you look at the entire electoral process, where Singaporeans were seemingly taking a more active part, that seemed to be a positive indicator, and I think the other thing was the fact that the independent candidates were conspicuously absent in this GE, and that seemed to suggest the electorate would prefer candidates backed by parties because that would mean the parties would have to have a platform on which they stand. That the parties have to stand for something. so overall I'd say Singaporeans seem to recognise the opposition parties are better organised, more cohesive, have a better campaign and a better slate of candidates and they appreciated that and that has translated into better support at the ballot boxes this time.

The overall better result for all parties is also a reflection that Singaporeans are not casting the automatic or what's been dubbed the donkey vote.

CEO of Mediacorp Press, Mr Mano Sabnani.

12. mano yes definitely that's a thing of the past because the message coming out of this GE that those who voted for the opposition are not necessarily anti Singapore or anti PAP, just in disagreement of certain policies so they may not vote for PAP for that reason.

PAP won 66.6 percent of the vote.

3. Mano it has to be borne in mind that all the way from 1984 right up to 1997 the average PAP was bet 60 and 65% so this is a slight improvement over the average for the overall period of time. But on the other hand the opposition is also happy with the result. They got to retain Potong Pasir and Hougang and they got to increase their margin of victory. So it seems the electorate is very intelligent, where in the right place, they've a good at the candidate, they've looked at the candidates and they've retained the 2 opposition they wanted there, but at the same time they made sure the PM and Ministers in other seats were returned with good majorities.

Mr. Mano Sabnani says all parties have shown maturity in handling their result as well.

This includes the PAP which fought hard to regain Potong Pasir and Hougang.
5. mano in certain previous GEs there was a bit of hand-wringing and almost fault finding for the performance but this time its more lets be happy with what we got and lets move ahead. And the opposition tried for aljunied and lost and they just smiled and said we'll try again. So that maturity is definitely there.

Mr. Mano Sabnani describes the changes he's seen in the last 2 decades, with the opposition.

10. mano previously they were really very splintered and they were splintered in the 80s meaning several parties, some very small, also 3-cornered fights in some areas and some times the opposition would fire potshots at one another. firstly it has evolved in that there are only 3 parties and all are sizeable, and although SDP a bit weak and imploding but of different strengths and everywhere straight fights in every constituency and they all concentrated on taking on the incumbent rather than among themselves. And the candidate calibre has also improved. So I think this GE marks possibly the start of a process where the Singapore political arena will be dominated by two or 3 parties, and PAP the main one. and significant ones which have their own following and have got clear platforms not anti Singapore but differing from the PAP, going for free market and democratic, but having different ideas on policy on how to improve Singapore.

The opposition-held wards which stayed with the incumbents were a particularly interesting microcosm of voters for these political observers.

The electorate in Hougang and Potong Pasir, Mr. Mano feels, had the big picture in mind when they cast their vote.

4. mano they know that there is a certain sacrifice, there's a price to pay as in their constituencies and townships there's not going to be getting the upgrading and government's funds so quickly and yet they said never mind we'll pay this price but we want these two gentlemen to remain because the whole of Singapore wants them. So here I don't think it's a matter of personality but obviously there's satisfaction with the way the 2 have conducted themselves generally. here what the government needs to relook at is quite a lot of people who are otherwise pro-PAP are not happy with this approach of putting opposition wards last in queue for government funds because we are a small countries and all places should be developed. So in this sense quite a lot of voters are not convinced by this approach taken.

Based on these two constituencies, Associate Professor Eugene Tan outlines what he thinks political parties will need to be aware of when they plan for the next election

This would be necessary, if they intend to evolve alongside them and if they are a reflection of Singaporean values.

1. Tan increasingly voters tend to be particular about equity issues and all. About the sense of fairness and fair play and voters didn't want to be held to ransom and so they probably said we'll stick with incumbents who have done a good job in spite of the constraints. So they'll need to customise their strategies depending on the electorate, because the general strategy for the entire nations, but in particular difficult or tricky wards, they'll need to make sure they don't turn voters' sentiments against them

Lawyer and former nominated Member of Parliament, Mr. Chandramohan Nair also says change is vital for growth

6 Chandra institutions need to be examined to see if they've met with first world nation or a sense of fair play and justice and I feel it hasn't arrived yet. And I think there should be public debate to see how well it can improve in the next 3 to 4 years.
Mr. Chandramohan suggests the PAP find ways to be more magnanimous in the eyes of the people.

7. Chandra when you look at campaigning - the defamation issue, the James Gomez issue, generally although the legal rights may be there, or parties that are affected I think in the electoral process, there’s got to be more liberal ways and that can be seen in other jurisdictions and I think a lot of people expect that during the elections. So one has to be a bit more forgiving and kind about it, especially a party which is very powerful. So the compassion needs to be there in a better fashion. PAP has come into power, its got 2-thirds, lets move on.

Associate Professor Eugene Tan adds that the government will have to keep pace with a maturing political climate.

2 As Singaporeans become more cosmopolitan they’ll aspire to be more involved in issues of government. So they’ll appreciate less mollycoddling and a less paternalistic approach. So I think they’ll want a more consultative govt. Never mind if we don’t go for every feedback session but we want to feel enfranchised beyond the election period. So we’re talking about what happens between elections rather than what happens during the period. Of course what happens during elections is important but that sort of culminates in what each party would have done in the intervening period.

As for the opposition parties, Associate Professor Tan says an indication of political growth for them will mean starting work now.

9. Eugene the main challenge will be to see if they can actually sustain their renewal process and attract good calibre candidates. They need to show their willingness and dedication to working the ground from now on to build on the tangible support to capitalise on the goodwill that they gained in the recent GE.

All analysts feel that political maturation will mean a more level playing field in the nation.

Mediacorp Press’ Mano Sabnani.

5. Mano I would say it’s taking some steps there but if there could be more of a level playing field I think that would be good for the country. meaning all parties compete on equal footing then they let the electorate which is mature look at the policies being put up and then decide on that basis rather than being pressured into voting for a particular policy because if you don’t you lose out in some way.

Mr. Chandra Mohan Nair.

If the other parties are given equal access, to a lot of these institutions then PAP will have real first class competition and then we’ll know their mettle and leadership.

This, perhaps, will lead to the first world government Singapore aspires to have, which moves ahead and stays together with its people.

Ends