Singapore rulers pledge new style of government
By Kai Portmann

Singapore (dpa) - In Singapore, a new stage of political development has started after the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) posted its worst result in decades in a landmark general election earlier this month.

During last weekend’s swearing-in ceremony for his new cabinet, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pledged a more humble and human style of government, adding that "nothing should be sacrosanct."

In a dramatic move, at least by Singapore standards, Lee announced the setting up of a committee to review and cut ministers' salaries, which are among the highest in the world and "the number 1 pet hate of many Singaporeans," as one local commentator put it.

Singapore cabinet members in 2009 earned between 1.57 million Singapore dollars (1.26 million US dollars) for a junior minister and 3.04 million Singapore dollars (2.44 million US dollars) for the prime minister, according to the Straits Times newspaper.

In comparison, US President Barack Obama is paid 400,000 US dollars per year.

In the past, the rulers of the city-state with a population of 5 million, have justified the salaries, arguing they were necessary to keep Singapore's governance top-notch and prevent corruption.

In a change to that policy, Lee said ministers should be paid properly, but "politics is not a job or a career promotion. It is a calling to serve the larger good of Singapore."

The prime minister's announcement met some scepticism in local internet forums with comments complaining that the panel to review the salaries was government-chosen and noting that "words are cheap."

"Even if they reduce (the salaries) a lot, they will increase their benefits to balance off," said one comment.

Other observers, however, applauded the government's approach.

"The salary review is but one of the plethora of recent developments that suggests that the PAP is serious and sincere about engaging the people," said Vishnu Varathan, Asia economist with Capital Economics in Singapore.

Despite the PAP having long attempted to justify the salaries as justified, its willingness to look again at the issue is "a very positive signal," he said.

The outcome of the review would not please everyone, but "the signal that the government has sent and the direction the PAP is taking is highly commendable," Varathan added.
Eugene Tan, assistant law professor at Singapore Management University (SMU), said Lee's willingness to deal with the longtime "sacred cow" of ministerial salaries demonstrated that he was "attuned to Singaporeans' unhappiness and concern."

"It has undercut the moral standing and legitimacy of the government at a time when the income gap is widening," Tan said.

A comment on the government-critical internet forum The Online Citizen noted the review of the cabinet’s salaries "is a good start-off point of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's promise of change."

The government’s commitment to a shift in its political style came after the PAP, which has ruled Singapore ever since 1959, in the May 7 election won only 60.1 per cent of the votes, down from 66.6 per cent in 2006 and 75 per cent in 2001.

With 81 of 87 parliamentary seats, the PAP still enjoys a vast majority. The opposition, however, posted its best result ever and managed to mobilize huge crowds of supporters who were unhappy with the government’s handling of hot issues like the rising cost of living.

"More interest groups and alternative views have emerged," Lee acknowledged in his swearing-in speech, adding that "our political system can and must accommodate more views, more debate and more participation."

His father, state founder and former premier Lee Kuan Yew, a week after the disappointing election drew his conclusions, apparently realizing that his authoritarian style of government was no longer in demand.

The elder Lee, 87, and fellow former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, 70, stepped down from their cabinet posts to make way for a younger generation of leaders, marking a historic moment in Singapore's development.

With the changes in his cabinet and the plan to review the ministerial salaries Prime Minister Lee "is working towards regaining the trust and political capital the government had," SMU's Tan said.

"In many ways, Lee is preparing for the next general election which will likely be the real watershed election," he said.

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