Upgrading, political diversity dominate forum

By Alicia Wong | SingaporeScene – Wed, Apr 13, 2011 9:01 AM SGT

PM Lee (right) tackles hard questions during the live TV forum.

Is it fair for the ruling People's Action Party to tie HDB upgrading to votes and is the PAP able to accept a diverse range of views?

These two issues drew some of the strongest exchanges between Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and the 12 participants during Channel NewAsia's live forum entitled "Question Time with The Prime Minister" aired on Tuesday night.

"Shouldn't a good government be fair to all citizens regardless of political vote?" asked Ngee Ann polytechnic student Matthew Zachary Liu.

Another, Singapore Management University student Edmund Koh Joo Peng, a Potong Pasir resident, added, "Isn't it unfair to really divide us because we live in Potong Pasir?"

Reiterating the stand he made last week on the upgrading issue, PM Lee said "everybody participates" in national programmes such as defence, education and healthcare.

"But when you have to make a choice who goes first and who goes second, then I think that one has to pay attention to who supported the government more and who didn't," said the PM.

"If you ask the people in Potong Pasir who do they want to make the government... I think they would say the PAP, so too in Hougang... In other words, they are depending on somebody else to vote for the PAP so that they can have the luxury of voting for Mr Chiam (See Tong) or Mr Low (Thia Kiang). If everybody does that, we're in trouble."
"So there has to be an incentive to vote for the government. And going first or second, well, that's just that little bit of difference."

But shouldn't upgrading be based on merit -- for example, older estates get priority -- since upgrading is a "nationwide programme funded by taxpayers", asked polytechnic lecturer Khartini Khalid.

PM Lee responded, "We pay attention to that too but if two estates are equal, then we have to ask who supported the government more."

The other issue that dominated the hour-long forum was if there was enough debate on issues and if there was enough representation from the private sector and blue-collar workers in Parliament.

Said private wealth fund vice-president Kurt Wee, "Many Singaporeans feel that a lot of the agenda the government put forth is bulldozed through without much feelings for the ground."

PM Lee replied, "If we bulldoze agendas through, we wouldn't stay in power very long because in the end, we have to govern with the consent of the people and in the interest of the people.

Recognising the need for more diversity in Parliament, PM Lee touched on the new expanded Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMP) scheme. The recent change allows for up to nine NCMPs, depending on the number of opposition candidates elected.

"That's a lot... nine is enough to form two-thirds of a Cabinet," he said.

Rejecting a follow-up that NCMPs were not "real Opposition", PM Lee disagreed.

"(NCMP)s have full rights to participate in a debate; all debates. They can argue, they can establish themselves and they belong to political parties. These are not Independents."

On the topic of leadership talent, SMU assistant professor and political commentator Eugene Tan asked if the PAP practices politics in a way that discourages people from "jump(ing) into the fray"?

PM Lee responded, "There are very few who miss our net because Singapore is a very small place."

The PAP talks to 200 to 300 people every term (five years) and narrows down the list to 20 to 25 suitable candidates, of whom an average of three become Ministers, said the PM.

He acknowledged it is hard to attract people from the private sector because those who are established face a "big risk" since politics is a "new field" where they can fail.
More than half of the questions during the forum moderated by presenter Melissa Hyak were related to politics. The remaining 40 per cent or so were on social issues such as the cost of living, housing and foreign talent.

For example, PM Lee shared how the government helps low-income families via programmes as Workfare and the Grow & Share package.

He also added, he "very much doubt(ed)" Goods and Service tax will be raised after the GE.

After the forum, PM Lee told CNA the government would take note of the issues raised and also said the questions were "good",

"It was good that they (participants) didn't pull their punches and so we had a frank exchange which I hope viewers would have found not only interesting but relevant and thought-provoking."

Postgraduate student Lin Peirong, 28, told Yahoo! Singapore, "PM was articulate in expressing himself, however, I am not convinced that PAP had addressed people's concerns in the past five years, even after the forum."

While the forum served as a "good platform to bring up issues", there was not enough depth in the discussion of each topic, she noted.

Dexter Ng, a 23-year-old Singapore Management University student, added, "While the debate on politics was lively, I felt that the participants did little to press PM Lee on the social issues, especially on the rising cost of living."