

## Singapore Protest Exposes Voter Worries About Immigration

By Shamim Adam - Feb 18, 2013 12:00 AM GMT+0800

Singapore's biggest political protest since allowing these events at a downtown park in 2000 may signal growing difficulty by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's government to push policies without broader support.

Thousands of protesters gathered on Feb. 16 at Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park at the edge of the city's financial district in the rain to oppose the government's plan to raise the population through immigration. Lawmakers from Lee's party, which has ruled Singapore since independence in 1965, endorsed a white paper earlier this month that outlined proposals to allow more foreigners through 2030 to boost the workforce.

The rally increases pressure on the government to slow an influx of immigrants that has been blamed for infrastructure strains, record-high housing and transport costs and competition for jobs. Photographer: Suhaimi Abdullah/Getty Images

"It's a big red flag and they cannot go on with business as usual, with their old way of doing things of letting it blow over and letting emotions run their course," said Terence Lee, who teaches politics at National University of Singapore. "This is not an emotional hump. I won't be surprised if significant changes happen at the ballot box in 2016."

The rally increases pressure on the government to slow an influx of immigrants that has been blamed for infrastructure strains, record-high housing and transport costs and competition for jobs. Singapore's population has jumped by more than 1.1 million since mid-2004 to 5.3 million and may reach 6.9 million by 2030, based on the proposal. That stoked social tensions and public discontent that is weakening support for Lee's People's Action Party.

### 'Work Harder'

"They will have to work harder at seeking buy-in rather than putting policies across as imperative," said Eugene Tan, assistant law professor at Singapore Management University and a nominated member of Parliament, who said the protest is the biggest in recent memory. "Gone are the old days where the government believes what is the right thing to do and they don't care what the public thinks and do what is right. Doing what is right is no longer enough."

Outdoor protests are banned in Singapore as authorities say the laws help maintain social stability in a country that was wracked by communal violence between ethnic Malays and Chinese in the 1960s. Since easing the restriction more than a decade ago, large-scale protests at the park have centered on issues such as losses from mini-bonds to the city's worst subway breakdown, rather than politics.

Organizer Gilbert Goh, who promoted the event mainly through Facebook, estimated 4,000 people joined the demonstration at the 0.94-hectare (2.3-acre) park that served as a venue for political rallies in the 1950s and 1960s. They sang patriotic songs and held signs saying "we want to be heard, not herded," and "waiting for 2016," when the next general election is due.

## Unprecedented Protest

The turnout, which he earlier estimated at as many as 5,000 two days ago, made it the biggest protest on a political issue since independence, Goh, who was an opposition party member, said in an interview yesterday.

The Workers' Party, the only opposition group with elected members in Parliament, said on its website the plan to spur economic growth through immigration isn't sustainable.

"A 6.9 million population won't be good for Singaporeans," said David Tan, a 48-year-old who owns a garment textile business and attended the protest. "We have 5.3 million people and we can hardly cope. Even if the government can take care of infrastructure, it won't help much in terms of quality of living."

There may be as many as 6 million people in Singapore by 2020, and the government will boost infrastructure to accommodate a further increase in the following decade, according to the white paper published last month.

## Angry People

"The size of the crowd shows people are angry," said Tan Jee Say, a candidate in Singapore's 2011 presidential election, who gave a speech at the protest. "It will send a signal to the government and I hope it will react in a sensible way and see that people are concerned."

Protesters expressed unhappiness with the policy that could see citizens, including new ones, making up only one of every two people on the island smaller in size than New York City by the end of the next decade should the population reach 6.9 million. Singapore is the third-most expensive Asian city to live in and the sixth globally, according to an Economist Intelligence Unit ranking of 131 cities published this month.

"Instead of increasing the population of this country so quickly, maybe we should focus on those that have been left behind," said Sudhir Vadaketh, author of "Floating on a Malayan Breeze." "A lot of Singaporeans are feeling a great sense of loss of identity. With continued high immigration, I worry about that sense of identity being diluted even more."

## Under Pressure

In a city with 3.3 million citizens and 2 million foreigners, complaints about overseas workers depriving locals of jobs and driving up home prices helped opposition parties win record support in the 2011 general election. Lee is under pressure to placate voters without disrupting the entry of talent and labor that helped forge Southeast Asia's only advanced economy.

Since the 2011 polls, Lee's party has lost two by-elections. Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister's father who was the city's first premier, stepped down from the Cabinet after the 2011 elections. He was hospitalized on Feb. 15 for a condition linked to irregular heartbeat, and was discharged yesterday. The ruling party still holds 80 of the 87 seats in Parliament.



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Ranked the easiest place to do business for seven straight years by the World Bank, Singapore is competing with lower-cost neighbors such as Malaysia and Indonesia for foreign investment.

“Singapore is moving toward becoming a normal democracy,” Tan from Singapore Management University said. “Foreign investors who are astute will realize that these are inevitable developments.”