

Government-people relations are key to Singapore's future success. The Government has to handle complex issues, and also understand what citizens consider critical to their lives in those issues.

It takes two to tango, and progress



BY
INVITATION

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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

AS SINGAPORE gets busy with its Golden Jubilee celebrations, more people are asking questions about the future of the country.

Some questions reflect optimism, aspirations and confidence. Others reflect pessimism, anxieties and angst.

Together, the general question appears to be whether Singapore will progress or regress as a society. The realistic answer has to be "It depends".

Many factors affect Singapore's future. One factor that deserves more attention is the relationship between the people and the government of the day.

Breach in trust

SINGAPORE not only survived but also succeeded in many ways for 50 years. This is partly because the Government and the people worked well together. After all, it takes two to tango.

But the people-government cooperation was not a once-off coordinated dance. Over time, it evolved into a social compact.

An important part of this compact is what behavioural scientists call the psychological contract.

This contract is developed when both parties have formed mutual beliefs and perceptions about each other, and these are then translated into informal obligations and expectations.

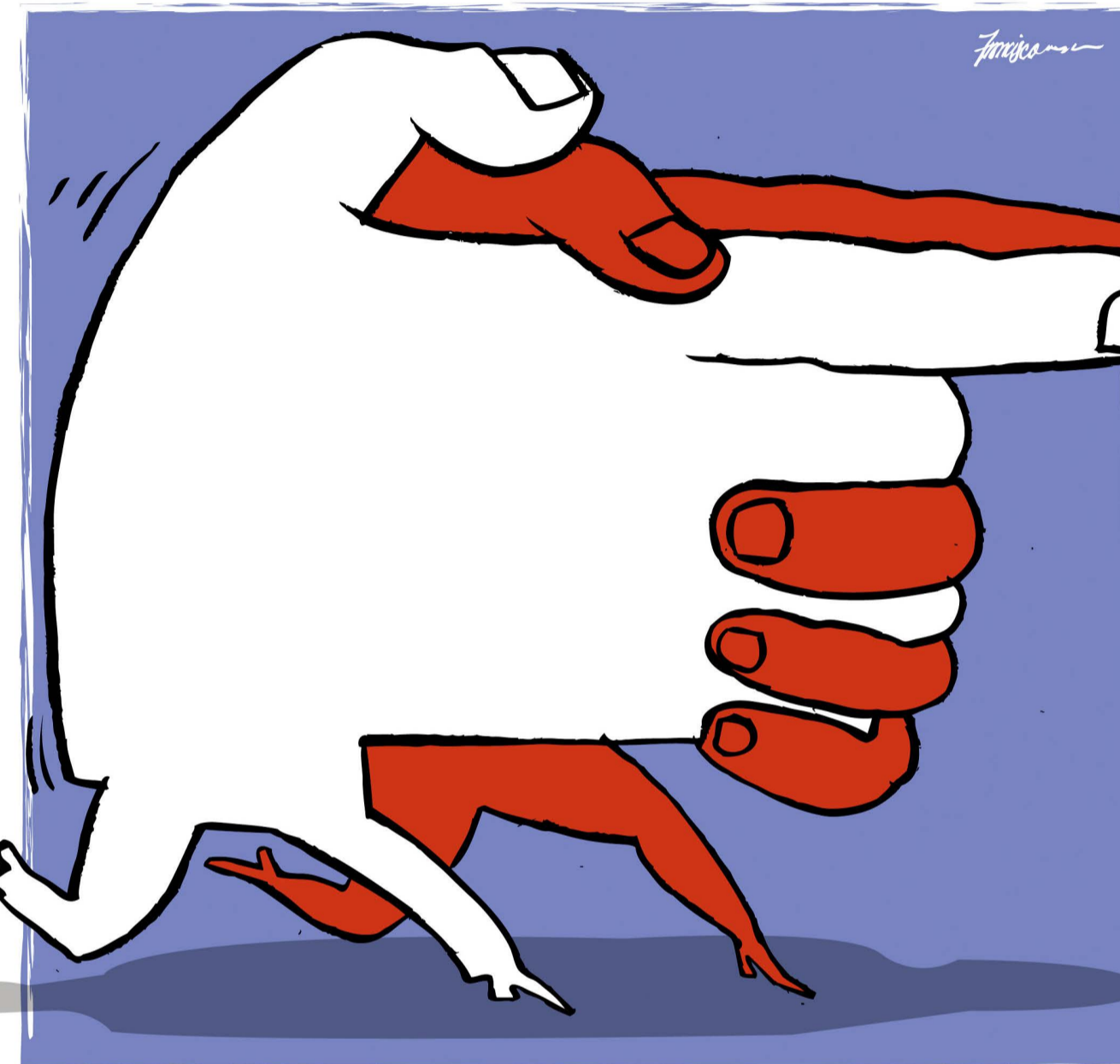
The psychological contract is breached when there are unmet expectations. An example is when the people believe that the government has failed to deliver what they perceive was promised.

Research has shown that breaches of the psychological contract by either party lead to disappointment and distrust.

When breaches persist, they breed cynicism, confirmatory bias, counter-productive behaviours and other negative consequences. These can culminate in a decision by one or both parties to dismiss, destroy or discontinue the relationship, as when employees resign, or when voters vote out a government.

Some commentators have written about a trust erosion, even trust crisis, in Singapore. I would characterise the situation differently, as one of "trust-in-transition", rather than a decline in trust.

As I wrote in this space in September 2013, this is a period when some citizens may go through feelings of doubt and ambivalence towards the Government. This happens as they compare the Government's positive record



with the current challenges in infrastructure and local-foreigner relations. During trust-in-transition, the citizen is questioning the government's competence, or even intentions. It is a critical period because what occurs during this time can have a major impact in "tilting" the trustor towards trust or distrust.

In recent years, the Government has made serious efforts to address this, for example by improving infrastructure, being more responsive to people's desires, and involving more people in policymaking.

The people have also proactively engaged the Government in constructive ways, through public feedback or civil society organisations.

Of course, there were instances when public demands could have been a little more reasonable. And instances when the Government could have done better in public communications and engagement. Moving forward, how will the social compact evolve?

Or more positively, how can the people and the Government

better honour the psychological contract and strengthen their social compact?

Complexity and 'criticality'

THE Singapore Government is good at decomposing a complex issue into its parts, and understanding how the different parts are inter-related. This ability to analyse complexity has served Singapore well.

Of course, if there is too much discussion on the complexity of an issue, it becomes difficult for many people to understand the issues that really matter. This is especially so when people do not have access to the relevant information or do not know where to look for it.

But complexity is not the same as what I call "criticality".

When the Government interfaces with people on complex issues such as economic restructuring or local-foreigner relations, the important question is: What is really critical in this particular context?

Or to put it another way: What really matters to people?

Take, for example, the debate on economic growth and foreign manpower. The idea that Singapore needs to increase the economic pie is not too complex a notion for most people to grasp. Nor is the idea that Singapore's limited local workforce means we have to be open to foreign labour.

But what is critical in these debates? What matters to Singaporeans in these issues?

For example, I know many Singaporeans who want to know how an enlarged economic pie will be equitably distributed and how it gets translated into actual benefits for citizens. I know many more who are concerned with the quantity or quality of the foreigner inflow.

A debate on foreign manpower that delves into the complexities of the economic issues could upset many citizens, because they may feel the Government is focused on defending its policies and does not understand their needs and problems.

That might be because citizens are less interested in the complexity of the issue, and care more for

what is critical to them: How will my life improve with growth? How will having more foreigners affect me - my job, my flat, my children? And my use of public spaces and facilities?

If people care most for what is critical to their lives, and less for the big-picture complexity of an issue, then the Government has to adapt the way it relates to and communicates with the people.

It is important to have empathy and show it, not just trot out the same or even more complex arguments. A person may believe in you or be more willing to accept a difficult change if he thinks you understand and empathise with his situation.

Empathy also can help repair a trust violation or address unfairness, either actual or perceived.

Principled, practical leaders

IT IS simplistic to think that reality is not complex. The Government is right to emphasise and explain complexity. It is the responsible thing to do when people in fact do not understand the gravity

of an issue. But it must go hand in hand with knowing what is critical to a person's concerns in a practical context.

The people need a government that can effectively tackle complexity and "criticality", attending to things that matter to people in different segments of the population.

Handling complexity requires analytical ability. Addressing "criticality" requires practical intelligence, empathy and ground experiences.

Explaining complexity includes sharing unpopular truths. It involves principled leaders who passionately serve with conviction and courage. Singapore's tough-minded Government has excelled at this in the past.

But focusing on "criticality" includes knowing the issues that matter to the people. It needs practical leaders who genuinely believe in consulting and co-creating solutions with the people. And grounded leaders with a common touch who intuitively feel what it is like to struggle in life and live with unachieved aspirations.

Robust, resilient citizens

FOR Singapore society to progress, it is critical that the country has principled leaders capable of handling complex issues, who are also attuned to what people consider as critical in their own lives.

At the same time, Singapore needs a robust and resilient citizenry. People should take constructive actions to achieve their aspirations by co-creating solutions with the Government and also within the community.

Indeed, there are many issues and problems best tackled by the people and the community, not the state.

The Government is often not the best candidate to make decisions on behalf of people when they involve societal norms and personal or collective values, such as giving up seats in trains to those who need them more, interactions between neighbours, or volunteer work.

When Singaporeans take constructive actions to set desirable norms, or to solve problems for themselves or the community, they become robust and resilient citizens who co-create solutions with the Government. They are not passive dependants who need to look to the Government for solutions and directions each time a problem occurs.

When there is a healthy social compact between the people and the government of the day, and both honour the psychological contract, Singapore will progress as a society.

It will be a place that the people will be proud to call home, not one that they constantly criticise.

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