

## **Has the trust bubble burst?**

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One pillar of Singapore's success story has been the high level of trust that most of its citizens have in their leaders to provide a safe, stable environment that delivers high economic growth.

These days, that trust in the government to do what is right is under strain, an annual survey by an international public relations firm has found.

For three years running, Edelman's Trust Barometer poll shows the level of confidence in the government sliding: 76 per cent in 2013, 73 per cent in 2014 and now 70 per cent this year.

Adding to the gloomy mood is a dip in three other institutions surveyed. Trust in media, business and NGOs all took a knock.

The media bore the brunt of Singaporeans' angst over its low-key reporting of apparently indiscriminate immigration, a widening gap between the haves and have nots, overcrowding and the rising cost of living. Those who said they trusted the media to do the right thing slipped to 59 per cent this year against 70 per cent previously.

Associate law professor and former legislator Eugene Tan attributed the continuing drop to rising expectations by the public and to government stumbles. "The government, including the public service, is seen as being less effective and efficient in the face of growing complexity and challenges in the public policy sphere," he said.

"This impacts detrimentally upon the perception of the government's competence. The public is also more educated and has higher expectations, especially when senior civil servants are very well paid by local and international standards."

Also, a public brought up with the mantra that Singapore has the world's best government is not prepared to give the benefit of the doubt when missteps happen. It is not that previous governments didn't make mistakes, but when they did, action was taken on the quiet and Singaporeans were none the wiser for what had really happened.

All that has changed courtesy of the Internet. For the first time, the government is facing something approaching the force of investigative journalism, with a prodding and probing online media exposing government failings and misdeeds.

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In 2012, a National Parks tender for folding bicycles for its officers ended with the government buying expensive Brompton bicycles from a Singapore firm. Social media smelled a rat, went on to reveal an NParks officer's closeness to the company and eventually led to his conviction for lying.

That scandal was exposed by online citizens, bloggers and media that dug into the affair with photographs revealing the relationship.

Even National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan admitted in a blog post: "I thought they could have gotten a better deal."



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Just a couple of weeks ago, Khaw was forced to admit that the way a tender was awarded for the building of a columbarium in a Chinese temple in a public housing estate now under development was laden with flaws.

Although The Straits Times was the first to break the story, online social media kept the heat on by questioning how a private company could have won the tender despite clear rules that such work should go to religious organisations or firms affiliated to them.

This trend of netizens having the potential to be media gamechangers shows up clearly in the trust barometer survey. Friends and family who create content online are more trusted (72 per cent) while journalists got only a middling 54 per cent. “Traditional was dethroned as the most trusted media type,” said Edelman.

With no sign that the government is ready to loosen media controls, the public is already punishing the traditional press where it hurts the most. The latest quarterly results of Singapore Press Holdings, which enjoys a near monopoly in print, reveal a business in decline. Circulation revenue was down 6.8 per cent and advertisement revenue dipped 8 per cent.

With Singapore into its jubilee year and a crucial election just around the corner, the trust barometer highlights growing pressures on the government and the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP).

“With the growing desire for a more competitive landscape and an apparently stronger opposition, the declining trust levels in the government do not augur well for the ruling party,” said Eugene Tan. “The PAP can expect a sterner contest in the next general election compared with the last one in 2011.”