

PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

In era of instant gratification, time not on Govt's side

Singapore's 'super-efficient' reputation is compounding the situation where people expect fast solutions: Analysts

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SINGAPORE – The Government's difficulties in managing public communications during the recent haze crisis was symptomatic of the immense pressure that the authorities are under in an era of Facebook and Twitter dominated by instant gratification and sound bite politics, political analysts said.

And while the phenomenon is not unique to Singapore, the People's Action Party Government's "super efficient" reputation — at a time when more stakeholders want to be consulted but quick solutions are expected —

is compounding the situation, political analysts and Members of Parliament (MPs) whom TODAY spoke to said.

As National University of Singapore (NUS) political scientist Bilveer Singh put it: "Today, the Government has to operate in a 24/7 news environment and yet policies cannot be operating in a similar mode. There is a bureaucracy ... and there are priorities that need to be aligned."

Noting the speed with which issues are "uploaded (on the Internet) and made viral", he pointed out that increasingly, "we are becoming hostages to the information and communications revolution".

This has made "almost every government" around the world look "inefficient, slow and incompetent" but the reality is not so, he said.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong added: "A lot of this is the result of a more open,

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Mr Seah Kian Peng

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR MARINE PARADE GRC

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connected world, where a lot more people have access to the same information and so, are able to react to it.”

When the Pollutant Standards

Index (PSI) hit historic levels last month, the Government announced a series of measures, including a special scheme to subsidise the needy and the elderly who visited designated general practitioners (GPs) for respiratory problems.

However, the GPs were made aware of the scheme at the same time that the public was informed.

As a result, some patients who had gone to their GPs the next day were unhappy to realise that the clinics were not part of the scheme. It took a few days before a significant number of GPs signed up.

Similarly, it took time for the N95 masks to be distributed to the retailers and there was some public dissatisfaction about some retailers running out of stock and others raising prices to profiteer despite the Government's pledge that there were adequate masks.

On the distributions of the masks, Member of Parliament for Marine Parade GRC Seah Kian Peng agreed that the “implementation was not fully thought out”.

But he added: “The situation was not helped because there were some groups of people out there spreading distortions about the PSI figures and the masks. Social media is useful, but in the situation when rumours are flying around, it forces the Government to address them. This takes up resources which could be spent on the actual work.”

NEED FOR SPEED

The experts noted that the pressure on the authorities to publicly address concerns swiftly, even though there are no easy and quick solutions was also apparent in the announcements over the past year or so by the Government to conduct open-ended review of policies such as the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) system, as well as the Design Build and Sell Scheme and the Executive Condominium Scheme.

And in some instances, there were unintended consequences as people brought forward their purchases of cars or houses amid the uncertainty and in anticipation of policy changes, noted property and transport experts.

In the case of the COE review, the rush pushed up the premiums, offsetting the effect of the car loan curbs which had brought down the premiums only a few weeks earlier.

While NUS transport expert Lee Der Horng noted the need for the Government to respond to the middle class, Mr Colin Tan, who is the Head of Research and Consultancy at Chesterton Suntec International,

pointed out its dilemma: "They may have wanted to tell people that they are aware of the issues, but at the same time it raises expectations and if nothing is done, then credibility can suffer."

Mr Siew noted that in some instances, the Government could be sending out feelers to gauge public opinion.

But Nominated MP Eugene Tan added: "Is the Government 'thinking aloud' being mistaken as definitive statements pointing to policy shifts? What may often be the Government's attempt to be seen to be responsive to ground concerns may instead be read as 'heads up' on inevitable policy change."

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad cited the complexity of issues that the Government are tackling and these involves several agencies and many stakeholders who want to be involved in the consultative process.

He said: "More issues are interconnected these days, with more implications. The Government needs more time to study the impact and consult stakeholders."

Whether or not the Government has ready solutions, Mr Seah stressed that it has to publicly address concerns — even if "intentions and outcomes may not be aligned" — just so that people know that policymakers are working on the issues. He said: "When people have been talking about (an issue) on social media, and they have been saying it for a certain length of time, they will be asking, how come nothing is happening?"

MANAGING PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS

The analysts and the MPs have no doubt that the Government has to communicate better.

For one, ministers need to calibrate their comments on policies that are market sensitive, Mr Siew said.

He added that most people do not expect the Government to have all the solutions but it "has to speak and act in a way consistent with that".

There is a "mismatch between what the Government can realistically deliver and what the Government has conditioned the public to expect", he said.

Mr Seah agreed that the Government has to set the right expectations. For instance, if the Government needs more time to tackle a certain issue, it has to make it clear. And when it doesn't have all the solutions, it should not give the impression that it does, he added.

Mr Seah said: "People must have trust in leaders. Leadership is about providing clarity, reassurance. When leaders come out to share their intention, I believe that, for most people, it is helpful and useful."

Associate Professor Tan, who is a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University, suggested that when a minister address specific policy concerns, he should "reflect and engender more policy coherence, rather than confusion".

The Government also needs to be clear and resolute about what policy tweaks need to be done and how to go about it, he said.

"There is a need to look at how to communicate so that policy changes achieve their intended outcomes," Assoc Prof Tan added.

But he stressed that the "fundamental challenge is to have a sound policy — no amount of spin doctoring can make up for an inherently flawed policy".

