

# Singapore's biggest challenge ahead is keeping the middle ground intact

Holding the centre together amid anxieties is a key driving force behind Forward Singapore.

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What holds a country together? A thriving middle ground.

For it is the broad middle ground that decides who has the right to govern in Singapore, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew highlighted in a speech to the British Labour Party in October 1967. He argued that this required the fruits of hard work and sacrifice to be "fairly and justly distributed" across the country.

At the People's Action Party's (PAP) 2018 biennial conference, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted the vital role the ruling party plays as a "broad tent, a broad church" bringing different groups together.

Most recently, in April 2023 and again in September, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong characterised the Forward Singapore exercise as advancing the well-being of the broad middle.

Ultimately, the aim is to build a vibrant, thriving and resilient society where the broad middle enjoys progress, the vulnerable receive care, and the better-off do their part to improve the lives of fellow citizens, the Forward SG report, which was unveiled last Friday, reads.

Strengthening this broad middle ground has been a tenet of Singapore politics under the PAP government, demonstrating how the politics of governing demand compromise and accommodation.

## STRENGTHENING THE MIDDLE GROUND

Who, then, constitutes this middle ground? It's fair to assume that the middle class, which makes up a strong majority of two-thirds to three-quarters of the population, overlaps significantly with the middle ground in Singapore.

Even so, those in the middle ground are defined less by their socio-economic status, and more by their political inclinations and sensibilities. They have a disposition towards moderation and centrism in politics. They avoid identity politics, trenchant ideological positions and political correctness.

They exert restraint on politically charged issues. Differences, even grievances, are resolved through civil debates and pragmatic compromises. Politics consequently remains conducive to moderate, non-partisan public policymaking.

Take the recent repeal of section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalised consensual sexual acts between two adult



To succeed, a social compact must operate as a mass movement, strengthening the broad middle ground in national politics, says the writer. A sustainable social compact is one where the Singaporean's bond with the country is enhanced, and affective ties between fellow Singaporeans nourished. ST FILE PHOTO

males. Contending groups could make their cases passionately, and they did so in a measured fashion. The middle ground wanted to reconcile and accommodate the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community's aspiration to be respected and accepted while avoiding any drastic shift in prevailing societal norms.

The episode demonstrated how Singaporeans generally want to live alongside one another and continue thriving despite their seemingly irreconcilable differences. Our politics was able to accommodate divergent values, manage differences and foster a community of reason through inclusive dialogue, deliberation and discernment.

Losing this broad middle ground has dire consequences. Society's core would become fragmented. Singaporeans could become polarised along fault lines – primarily, but not limited to, class, race and religion. Public distrust might evolve into distaste for government, politicians and the political process.

Yet, far too few governments pay adequate attention to maintaining the political centre. In the United States, the hollowing of the middle ground since the 1980s has been accompanied by a coarsening of politics and bitter partisanship that has left voters disenchanted with Washington. The decline in considerate behaviour in Congress is evident: Politics is reduced to a parlour game, with trust and confidence in government gravely compromised.

Recognising these dangers, PM Lee noted in 2018 that when the

middle ground weakens or withers away, "the extremes will grow, politics will have to follow and become a zero-sum game... Once our society goes this way, we're in that downward spiral, and it'd be practically impossible to rebuild centrist politics again and bring Singaporeans together again".

## ENTER FORWARD SINGAPORE

The Forward SG report, Building Our Shared Future, proposes a recalibration of Singapore's social compact. The refreshed iteration is fundamentally about strengthening the broad middle ground and ensuring government and politics enjoy broad-based support and a unity of purpose.

Taken together, the seven policy shifts proposed aim to buttress confidence in Singapore's future, despite a troubled external environment and domestic constraints posed by a rapidly ageing population, limits in land, labour and carbon, and challenges of inequality and social mobility.

Forward SG seeks to preserve the middle ground by keeping politics, economics and society inclusive. In turn, this new social compact requires a multi-stakeholder approach.

The fourth generation of PAP leaders' belief is that the broad middle ground can be consolidated by nurturing a thriving and resilient middle class. The big question that remains is how the identified policy shifts will be actualised.

## THE PROMISE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Let's take one example of social mobility and its promise of

increased economic opportunity. This promise has served as a powerful motivator for the Singaporean middle class, and a source of social cohesion.

The Singapore Government's Budgets in the past decade have consistently cleaved to supporting the bottom quintile of income earners through a focus on equitable distribution and sharing of national prosperity: Those more in need will receive more.

Yet, economic openness for a trade- and investment-dependent Singapore has not seen the benefits trickle down to every Singaporean. Leaving Singaporeans to free market forces and logic will result in seniors, people with disabilities and lower-income earners being pushed to the wayside.

Now, there are also middle-class Singaporeans who have found the economic transformation and restructuring worrying. They may have been displaced by the rapid economic changes. For this group, the nation's prosperity seems to have passed them by.

Hence, this abiding imperative to renew Singaporeans' confidence in the open economy through Forward SG is crucial. Economic growth must improve people's lives, if the way society is organised and governed is to continue to enjoy buy-in from large swathes of Singaporeans, as the Forward SG report emphasises.

Embracing learning beyond grades and rewarding every job are two key policy shifts promising to give Singaporeans ample opportunities for progression. These policies aim to give every Singaporean a stronger stake in the country through a full

range of pathways to success, robust social safety nets, and the shaping of societal norms. They also aim to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their station in life.

While it is hard to disagree with these noble aspirations, significant mindset shifts and a less individualistic pursuit of education and work will be necessary. Otherwise, how will our meritocracy be broadened for it to be a continuous meritocracy that privileges skills rather than academic credentials? How can lifelong learning not end up as yet another educational arms race, where lifelong academic credentialing becomes the norm?

## ENHANCING INCLUSION

Stronger inclusion seems to be the answer. In joining the debate on the President's Address at the opening of the second session of the 14th Parliament in April, Mr Wong noted the societal challenge of finding ways "to affirm the dignity of our differently abled citizens and enable them to realise their full potential" such that "none among us (is) left behind".

The policy imperative is to "assure the broad middle that they, too, can be confident of meeting their needs at every stage of life, even in the face of setbacks".

Forward SG envisages a closer lookout for children from disadvantaged homes. Education, especially pre-school education, becomes critical in ensuring offspring are not disadvantaged by the fortunes of their parents. Giving these children access to educational opportunities from

the onset is essential to prevent the generational transmission of disadvantage. This commitment towards preventing a permanent underclass from forming is laudable.

The report also recognises non-financial support as a central feature of our ecosystem of care and caring. To help families become self-reliant and confident about the future, family coaches will be provided for vulnerable families who do their part to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This underlines the holistic approach to help low-income families break out of the poverty cycle and eventually become self-sufficient.

This is sensible, given gross limitations to what generic income transfers can do, useful as they are. In 2022, each household member living in one- and two-room Housing Board flats received \$12,189 on average from government schemes, almost double the transfers received by their counterparts in three-room HDB flats. Although redistribution through government transfers and taxes is needed, the possibility of some developing easy reliance on handouts must be closely watched.

It is a pipe dream that Forward SG's several policy shifts will entirely remove inequalities in our society. But they must result in a less unequal, fairer, and more just society.

We are all better off as a society when the operating system and culture we have promotes and protects resilience, hope and confidence in the future, regardless of one's socio-economic status.

## A FAIRER AND MORE JUST SOCIETY

Forward SG is a necessary correction to Singapore's evolving socio-political health. Whether it can hold the centre and prevent Singapore from falling into divisive, populist politics is the real litmus test. These policy shifts must now form the cornerstone of national policies and how Singaporeans relate to one another, especially those unlike them.

In this, governments alone cannot maintain and legitimise any social compact. To succeed, the social compact must operate as a mass movement, strengthening the broad middle ground in national politics.

A sustainable social compact is one where the Singaporean's bond with the country is enhanced, and affective ties between fellow Singaporeans nourished. It must create a high-trust society.

Forward SG is ultimately about the quest for inclusive politics – bringing people together, joined by a common cause and bonded by a socio-political compact, to tackle key challenges of the day. The election manifesto-feel to the Forward SG report seeks to reassert the PAP government's "centrist" credentials.

What lies ahead is whether the 4G leadership can secure the strong buy-in of Singaporeans and inspire the necessary behavioural changes from all stakeholders – government, businesses, civil society and individuals – for the refreshed social compact.

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