

The Straits Times Online; 28 September 2011; 'No populist turn for Singapore politics'



THE People's Action Party's loss of ground in the May 7 General Election will not cause Singapore politics to take a populist turn, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew said at the Russia-Singapore Business Forum yesterday.

He was responding to a question about the future of leadership in Singapore.

A forum participant, noting that Singapore's strong leadership was one of its advantages, asked: 'With the political ground having shifted, are we likely now to see a more populist form of leadership in Singapore and perhaps a somewhat weaker form of government?'

Mr Lee did not think that would be the case.

'You lose one GRC and six seats in Parliament, that's not a disaster,' he said.

'It's just a change in the mood of the people. And whether the change continues depends upon the performance of the new elected people and the response of the Government.'

Some Singaporeans had decided to 'bring in (political) competition' in the belief that it would be good for the people and Government, said Mr Lee.

'But unless the competition is positive, I don't think the trend will continue,' he added.

The question was a follow-up to an earlier one from Russian entrepreneur Ruben Vardanian, who had asked about the problem of populist leadership, whereby worries regarding re-election might hold leaders back from making unpopular decisions.

In response, Mr Lee said that leaders can change policies once the people have decided that change is necessary.

Referring to the recent banking crisis, he noted that Americans and Europeans were leading comfortable lives, and thus did not welcome drastic change.

'But if it goes on - piling on debt and living beyond their means - then their mood will change and then the leaders will be able to take action,' said Mr Lee, adding that 'leaders cannot move out of step with the people'.

On the topic of leadership, a Russian graduate of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy asked: 'Do you think that institutions have come to be too strong to let any single individual emerge as a strong leader?' Mr Lee replied that institutions are important to 'make up for the shortcomings of weak leaders'. With strong institutions, countries such as the US can still go on even if they have weak leaders, said Mr Lee. 'If you depend on a strong leader without institutions, the moment you change the leader, you are in trouble.'