

## **Forward Singapore not a political exercise, meant to engage Singaporeans and their diverse views: Lawrence Wong**

**The repeal of 377A is also “not a done deal” because it has to be discussed in Parliament first, says the Deputy Prime Minister at a conference.**

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SINGAPORE: The Forward Singapore initiative is not a political exercise but a national one for those interested in building a better Singapore, said Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on Wednesday (Sep 7).

Mr Wong was responding to a question at the Young Singaporeans Conference 2022, on how the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) would incorporate diverse views that emerge from an exercise aiming to review and refresh Singapore’s social compact.

“We’re not doing a political exercise ... We’re not talking about engaging political parties, we’re talking about engaging Singaporeans,” he said.

“Understandably, Singaporeans have diverse views, there will be diverse opinions, and we welcome that.”

Forward Singapore was launched in June by the party’s fourth-generation or 4G leadership team.

In April, Mr Wong was named as leader of this team, paving the way for him to become Singapore’s next Prime Minister.

He added on Wednesday that the Government would take in feedback and try to reach out to as many people as possible - regardless of their background and political beliefs - to participate in the exercise.

“This is not a political exercise,” Mr Wong, who is also Finance Minister, reiterated.

“It is a national exercise for all of us with an interest in building a better Singapore to say, ‘let’s come together as one country and let’s think about how we might want Singapore to be greener, to be fairer, to be more inclusive, to be a better society for ourselves and also for our next generation’.”

### **POLITICAL DIVERSITY**

At the conference, which was organised by the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank at the National University of Singapore, Mr Wong also addressed a question on how Forward Singapore accommodates political diversity since it cannot be taken for granted that the PAP would continue to win elections going forward.

“Singaporeans will decide that,” said the DPM. “Every election is a free election ... How much diversity, how much checks and balances - that’s really for Singaporeans to decide.”

“Ultimately, from my point of view, in Government now and eventually when we have elections, it’s for us to present our report card to Singaporeans to show what we have achieved ... And then to let Singaporeans decide whether or not we have done enough, whether we are deserving of your confidence and trust, and continue to form the Government in Singapore, or if they feel that someone else is better and there are other alternatives they prefer.”

There is a universal trend and desire for more checks and balances, Mr Wong noted.

“The likelihood that there will be more political contestation is real. This is true everywhere around the world, it will happen in Singapore too,” he said.

“That’s why we have been saying ... That we should all recognise that every election going forward will not be so straightforward. You cannot assume that it will always be the PAP in Government.”

### **377A REPEAL**

Mr Wong also addressed the repeal of Section 377A on the horizon, and whether there were any viable next steps on the issue of inclusivity for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in Singapore.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had announced in his National Day Rally last month that the Government would repeal the colonial-era law criminalising sex between men.

But this is “not a done deal” because it has to be discussed in Parliament first, Mr Wong stressed as he noted the “very strong” views on both sides.

“Let’s not even get to what is the next step before we have not even taken the first step,” he said.

“We are repealing 377A because we think that there are considerable legal risks of it being struck down if challenged, and if it’s so, it’s not just 377A, but even the definition of marriage could be struck down on the grounds that it’s unconstitutional.”

There are large segments in Singapore who “care deeply” about marriage as defined currently - between a man and a woman - as well as family norms such as how children are brought up and what is taught in schools, Mr Wong added.

The Government’s proposal is to repeal 377A but also take steps to amend the Constitution to protect the current definition of marriage from being challenged legally.

This, said Mr Wong, will assure those concerned that the repeal “is the start of change” - that there will in fact be no change to marriage, family and social norms.

“Before anticipating, thinking about what future steps we might do, let’s get past this first hurdle and see how we can get to a stage where we find a new balance that the broad majority of Singaporeans will accept, and we can get through this debate without further dividing or polarising our society,” said Mr Wong.

It's a real concern for us, that if we can't even get through this first step without keeping our society together - don't even talk about next steps."

## **PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

Mr Wong also discussed the key lessons Singapore took from fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Government is currently reviewing Singapore's response from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to August last year, before it adopted the approach of living with the virus, said the DPM.

"There will be lessons, I'm sure. We will look at what we can do to improve, but it's a continuing thing," he added.

For example, Singapore had developed a high-quality contact tracing system during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2003.

But COVID-19 showed that this manual system was "not quite the gold standard", said Mr Wong.

"It took three days or so to do the contact tracing, by then 'game over', the virus has spread all over. And then we developed an IT solution for it, which is much better," he added.

"We will learn the lessons arising from the responses we made, the missteps that took place, the things that could have been done better."

However the next pandemic will be different, and "who knows whether the capabilities we built up will be sufficient", said Mr Wong.

"I'm sure it will catch us by surprise one way or the other no matter what we do to improve ... Therefore, the ability to learn from our missteps, to continually do better, that is very critical in facing the next pandemic or any crisis."