

## **Multi-party system has real long-term risks for Singapore: Ong Ye Kung**

***Liyana Othman***

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Having a multi-party system of government carries real long-term risks for Singapore, said Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung on Monday (Jan 23), as he addressed the hypothetical scenario of Singapore becoming a two- or multi-party system.

These risks lie not so much in being in a multi-party system per se, but in the forces and processes that lead Singapore there, Mr Ong said, addressing a seminar at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference, titled "What if Singapore becomes a two- or multi-party system?"

"Let's talk about the elephant in the room, which is the PAP (People's Action Party) - which I represent today," he told his audience. "The scenario painted to us is that by 2065, will the big elephant be replaced by maybe several smaller elephants that, through contests and elections, take turns to govern by themselves or through coalitions?"

He noted that for a two- or multi-party system to take shape, there must first be a partisan line – two different paths for the country to take. "Some of these paths are like a fork in the road. They diverge but they can come back together again. Sometimes it's also a T-junction. I turn left, you turn right, and we'll never meet."

Mr Ong cited Brexit - the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union - as well as the divisive US presidential election, as examples of what could happen when a society is split.

"Political parties are essential in representing the diverse views of the people they represent, and elections a necessary and peaceful discourse in finding compromise, finding a common path forward. This is the essence of democracy. But the same essence can take a nasty twist, sowing discord, dividing societies," he said, noting that such forces could pose long-term risks to Singapore under a multi-party system.

A multi-party system could also result in slower decision-making, especially in a changing global landscape, Mr Ong added.

"Imagine if we had a multi-party system back in 1965," he said. "Would we have come so far so quickly?" He cited the Government's ability to attract foreign investment from multi-national companies at a time when it was "not politically correct to do so".

And now, Mr Ong said, Singapore needs to move fast as well. "If we envisage a future of tough challenges - challenging demographic trends, shifting political or geopolitical landscape, more intense competition internationally, rising sea levels - unity, common purpose and the ability to move faster than others will be a central advantage that Singapore has.

"The current system has worked well for the majority of Singapore and Singaporeans. It still gets my vote as the best system for Singapore."

Mr Ong added that Singapore's equilibrium as a small country "may well be a single-party system". This could be the PAP today, but it could be another party in the future, as long as it is the most capable one to serve Singapore, he said.

## **A MULTI-PARTY SINGAPORE**

But what would a Singapore governed by two or more parties look like? Mr Ong pointed out that this was not a new phenomenon, especially in hotly contested constituencies. He gave the example of the 2011 General Election, where his PAP team in Aljunied lost to the Workers' Party.

"In 2011, when I didn't manage to win in Aljunied, I found myself becoming the opposition party in Aljunied," he said. "So in Aljunied at that time, I had supporters (and) when they organised events, they would invite me as the guest of honour. On the other hand, there are many other groups too that would invite the Workers' Party MP as the guest of honour."

"But most would invite both of us. And we'd both turn up, and I got a feeling the guests at the event actually quite enjoyed watching the jostling between us. And in a multi-party system, essentially, that would happen on a wider scale throughout the country, at events, behind the scenes."

Likewise, unions, associations and clans, as well as the media could be split in a multi-party system, Mr Ong said.

He added that the civil service is the institution that would be most tested, as it has to stay politically neutral and serve whichever party forms the Government. "You can work on one set of policies for five years and someone new comes along and asks you to undo everything you have done and move in a new direction," he said. "That can be very frustrating and disheartening."

Ultimately, he said, it is up to the people whether Singapore is governed by a single party or many parties.

On the part of the PAP, it has to make sure the current system continues to work, Mr Ong said. "We must be a party that is open-minded and keep up with times and circumstances - so that ... policies can adapt to the needs of the society and our people. Never think that today's solutions are the best they can be."

"We must attract talent from as diverse a background as possible to serve. That is why, every term, we replace a quarter to a third of our candidates."

Finally, Mr Ong noted that the challenge for the PAP was for it to be as pluralistic a party as possible. "A party of all colours – take in everyone with different views ... There are many PAPs, in a way. You have the PAP of PM Lee Hsien Loong. You can also have the PAP of DPM Tharman (Shanmugaratnam). You can have the PAP of Louis Ng, of Denise Phua, of Patrick Tay or Halimah Yacob. Everyone with a different bent, different objectives they want to achieve - and it must be broad enough a party to take in all of them," he said.

"Today, I think it exists. There are diverse views, but the public doesn't see them. But perhaps, as part of our mastery of governance, this is something we ought to formalise over time." - CNA/ek