

PM Lee tackles questions on governance at SG50+ conference

In a session moderated by Dr Fareed Zakaria, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong talks candidly on governance in Singapore and the limits to freedom of speech to maintain racial and religious harmony.

Hetty Musfirah Abdul Khamid & Olivia Siong
Channel NewsAsia, 3 July 2015

SINGAPORE: Singapore should seek to maintain a system where the interests of the majority of the people are to support a good government, which will develop policies that help most Singaporeans, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Mr Lee made this point at the opening dinner for the SG50+ conference on Thursday evening (Jul 2), organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He had been asked by CNN host Dr Fareed Zakaria who was moderator for the Q&A session, why Singapore has not transitioned like several other advanced countries politically.

"In most other countries, the governments do not develop policies which are meant to help everybody equally. If you're Republicans, it's quite clear whom your policies are meant to help. Mitt Romney said 'Well it's 55 per cent, and the other 45 should take care of themselves'. If you're a democrat, you also know what your constituency is and you take care of that constituency. If you're the senator of Montana, you know you're supposed to bring the bacon back to Montana.

"But in Singapore, the Government's job is to look after as large a proportion of the population as possible, while still giving people incentive to vote for this Government so that they will get some benefit from it. And if we take the view that if you voted against me, I shall help you first, because that shows my largeness of spirit, then I think we will go extinct as a Government."

MAINTAINING PROGRESS FOR THE FUTURE

At the conference, meant to examine Singapore's past and explore how it can thrive in the next half a century, Mr Lee said there has been strong conviction to build the country. Good leadership and regional stability also contributed to Singapore's progress. And the challenge would be to maintain this progress for the future.

"We worry all the time. People say we're paranoid, which I suppose we are and we need to be because at a higher level, you expect to be at a higher level, you don't expect to go back to where you were in the 1960s and yet it's not natural that you stay at this place.

"Is it to be expected that a population of three-and-a-half million citizens and maybe a million foreign workers will have the best airline in the world? The best airport in the world? One of the busiest ports in the world? A financial centre, which is one of three or four key financial centres in the world and an education and healthcare and housing system which gives us a per capita GDP, which is - at least by World Bank calculations if you look at PPP (purchasing power parity) - higher than America, Australia or Japan.

"It's an entirely unnatural state of affairs and one which we should count our blessings for, if not every day, at least every election."

RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY

On the issue of racial and religious harmony, Mr Lee said maintaining this will be a challenge. This is the case, especially with the advent of social media and the threat of terrorism.

"There has to be a lot of give and take because you need strict rules, but at the same time, this is an area where if you insist on going by the rules, everybody is going to be a loser. It is not possible for us to codify in a set of statutes exactly what is permissible (and) what is not permissible conduct.

"You know that the French had this murder of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonist in Paris earlier this year. Freedom of speech, 'I am Charlie Hebdo'. We have freedom of speech too, but we also acknowledge restraints when it comes to denigrating somebody else's faith, when it comes to proselytising and trying to persuade somebody else to come over to your faith. Or even when it comes to how you express your own beliefs so as not to cause offence to others and some of these are written down and in extremis, we have to take a person to court.

"It's happened with this young man Amos Yee recently. But most of the time really, you need some way to tap the person on the shoulder or tap his religious leader on the shoulder and say do you really want to do this, is it wise. And fortunately we have religious leaders who have been wise and so we've avoided having to use the law very often.

"But with social media, it becomes a harder problem because the restraints are less, the possibility of giving offence and the ease of taking umbrage is so much greater. Overnight you can wake up, you can find that somebody has been unwise and everybody has become upset and we have to run around putting out fires. It's happened more than once and I'm sure it'll happen again."

ACCOMMODATING YOUNGER SINGAPOREANS

Mr Lee was also asked how the country can accommodate younger Singaporeans who have grown up with an open media culture, are more autonomous and have a stronger sense of identity, and live in an age of peace and prosperity.

"I think the politics will change. It's a new generation. They have different aspirations, different interests. You look at the causes which they have adopted - some are religious, some are green causes, some are social causes, all sorts of things.

"So they have passions, they are pursuing them and we have to find, they have to find leaders who will be able to marshal enough of them to form a core to lead the country, and a majority of them to support the system which will work."

At the end of the Q&A session, Dr Zakaria thanked Mr Lee for soldiering on despite being under the weather. The conference was attended by business leaders, policymakers and students.