

Govt quizzed on whether it's willing to 'cede influence, accept more views'

Ng Jing Yng

TODAY, 19 January 2016

SINGAPORE — Good governance has been billed as Singapore's competitive advantage by the ruling party, but academics at a forum yesterday raised the issue of whether the Government is ready to embrace a broader range of views, as well as the question of how good governance and politics should be defined.

Speaking at a panel discussion at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives forum, which included Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing, they also asked if the Government was ready to cede influence in its bid to become a more "collaborative" government, and be more transparent in sharing information.

In his opening remarks to kick off the discussion — one of four at the forum — Mr Chan said good governance is Singapore's edge in ensuring success, given how the country cannot compete on natural resources and demographics. It can "create the special competitive advantage for (Singapore) to defy the odds of history ... (to) survive and thrive", he said.

This will require good policies, good processes that tap collective wisdom and actions, and good people serving to advance Singapore's future.

However, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, who was among the audience members, questioned if the Government was willing to cede control to civil society and other members of the public, in embracing plurality in views.

Referring to the metaphor of the People's Action Party (PAP) as a banyan tree that has to be trimmed to allow plants underneath to flourish — by former Foreign Minister George Yeo — Professor Koh noted how some PAP Members of Parliament helm sporting associations, although some do not have sporting credentials.

"If the (PAP) is aware and acknowledges the need to trim the banyan tree further in the new Singapore, will the party give more room to civil society and reduce the role that it plays?" asked Prof Koh. "Will the Government embrace the continued growth of a culture of tolerance (that) respects and accepts diversity of points of view?"

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan, who was one of the panellists for the session, said there have been good examples of collaborative governance, such as tripartism and the People's Association's (PA) work in the community. However, these efforts are also "very intimately tied to the ruling party". Should the ruling party become incompetent or corrupt, how would a "systematic collapse" in Singapore be prevented, asked Associate Professor Tan.

Fellow panellist, Drama Box artistic director Kok Heng Leun, citing the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle, also felt that it has been driven by "power holders" and issues are not surfaced publicly.

“If the public is not able to speak about this issue safely and fearlessly, then the idea of having a free space (and) the idea of having a democratic space become questionable,” he said.

Assoc Prof Tan was also concerned that in getting caught up in “binaries like “good” versus “destructive” politics, anything that does not fall into the former might get thrown out of the window. “I think it is important to recognise ... (young people) are also concerned about idealism. After all, it is idealism that (brought) us to where we are today.”

Responding to the various points raised, Mr Chan, who is also the labour chief, noted that the PAP is a “victim of its own success”, where people will always look to the Government to fix problems, citing the performance of local football as an example.

Various interest groups must also go beyond reaching a consensus among themselves, to convincing the broader society of their decisions, he added.

In his opening remarks, Mr Chan also said the hope is that in aiming for “collaborative governance”, Singapore does not “degenerate” into a situation where people talk about what they want, and “leave the execution to someone else or absolve their responsibilities to future generations”.

“We also do not want it to be a democracy of empty words ... we want to act collectively. If we can do that, I think even as a small country, we can defy the odds,” he said.