

2 party system unlikely to happen in S'pore, but 'ownself check ownself' is a virtue: Ong Ye Kung

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The two-party political system is unlikely in Singapore because of its geography and reality as a city-state, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said on Jan. 13.

Ong was responding to question posed at the opening of the second day of the Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank, on whether the need for a strong state is compatible with a strong opposition, or even possibly a two-party system.

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The minister explained his reasoning by saying that Singapore was not a big polity like the UK or the U.S.

Ong explained, "Between the east and west of the U.S., someone in Alaska thinks very differently from someone in Massachusetts or New York City. Likewise in the UK, someone way up in Scotland thinks very differently in from someone living in London."

Hence, because of this great difference in views, perspectives and aspirations, such countries naturally have different political parties catering to the various population segments, he added.

The logical outcome of this is that governments can change during elections, depending on their weight of support.

Ong then said that in the case of Singapore:

"Between Jurong and Changi, people equally worry about cost of living, people equally worry about Covid. I think in terms of fundamental views, it may differ from person to person, but not between regions."

This means that as a city-state, if people are unhappy with a policy, the government can change from east to west. "It just flips across the whole city," he said.

Conversely, if the government does a good job and people are happy, it will spread throughout the island as well, Ong noted.

"So because of that, I don't think the same two-party system will in happen Singapore because of geography, because of the reality of what we are as a city-state," he said.

The PAP should not take for granted its status

This brought up Ong's remark, "So we (the PAP) are now the ruling party, you can never take for granted this will be the case."

The PAP must therefore continue the "good work" of earlier generations and ensure that it is an accountable government that serves the people with policies that make sense on the whole.

While the policies will not please everyone, they must ultimately move in the direction that a great majority can accept and be good for the long-term so as to maintain the trust of the people.

"If we can do that, I think we can continue the good path and I feel this is the role of my party," he said.

"Ownself check ownself" with different institutions is a virtue

Ong noted that there was a "legitimate concern" among the public about checks against the state going rogue, given that a strong state is needed to do long-term, difficult things.

There is therefore a role for different kinds of institutions for checks and balances in ensuring that the executive branch of government is accountable to the people, he said.

One such institution is the civil service which is neutral and non-political below the level of the Permanent Secretary.

"We are quite unlike some systems where a political party takes over and layers of civil servants change," he explained.

Another is the rule of law, upheld by the judicial system which comprises of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau and the Auditor-General's Office, the minister added.

These are organs of state within the system that constantly check that the system is clean and functioning well.

Ong then highlighted, "People can say ownself check ownself but it is a virtue. I see it always as a virtue. If ownself cannot check ownself, you are in big trouble. This is a basic prerequisite."

Ong also pointed to the role of the political opposition in Parliament in constantly raising other points of view that need to be debated and taken seriously.

"So, all these added together, I think we can have a fairly effective functioning state that serves the people," he said.