

Heng Swee Keat tackles questions on POFMA, 377A, & the S'pore Together movement

Heng said that there is no consensus on the issue of abolishing Section 377A of the penal code.

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While Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat fielded difficult questions from opposition politicians during the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives Conference on Jan. 20, 2020, the non-politicians in the audience did not shy away from asking tough questions too.

Moderated by IPS Director Janadas Devan, Heng was invited to share his thoughts on Singapore's fake news law, gay marriage, and the Singapore Together movement that he initiated six months ago.

Facts needed to make the right decision

Heng took two questions on the use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulations Act (POFMA) during the question and answer session following his speech.

The first came from Walid Jumblatt Bin Abdullah, an academic from Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

Referring to Heng's point in his speech about "trust between government and the citizens", he asked if under Heng's leadership, the government will continue to use "harsh laws" like POFMA as a solution to problems.

Waleed (*sic*) said: "Don't you think such laws only increase and widen the gap between citizens and the government, especially in the way it's been used today? Almost exclusively on the members of the opposition."

Another audience member, who identified himself as Matthew Ting from the China Foundation, also asked about POFMA.

He pointed out that if POFMA was about getting the facts right, Singaporeans should then have a Freedom of Information Act to help them easily access facts that will aid public discourse.

Addressing POFMA's "harshness", Heng said that POFMA is not about stopping people from having different points of view, but to stop falsehoods.

He recounted meeting an American during a trip abroad, who said that while he valued the tenet of free speech, and everyone is entitled to their own opinion, they are not entitled to their own facts.

Heng said, "Because without proper facts, you cannot make the right decision. The country cannot collectively make the right decision."

Marketplace of ideas needs regulation

Heng also quoted Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz's recent article in the Financial Times, about the need for regulation of the marketplace of ideas.

Heng gave the example of cough syrup, and how it was necessary to have the correct information on it to ensure that it does not harm others. He added:

"So in many instances, to protect public interests, you need to ensure that what you put out is true, and that the person is not lying to you and encouraging you to buy something."

Heng said that for political discourse, when making decisions about the future of the country, it is all the more important that opinions and facts are accurate, and not false and misleading.

He added that POFMA is still needed to tackle the rising issue of fake news and false facts. While Heng welcomed a diversity of opinions and views, it has to be based on facts which everyone could agree on.