

No guarantee S'pore's system will continue to work & neither does 'political pluralism': Shanmugam

He said that while the ruling party has always been held accountable, it has always been Singaporeans' choice to choose good leaders "in whichever system they want".

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Mothership, June 13, 2023

The Institute of Policy Studies' held its 35th anniversary conference on June 12, hosting a question and answer panel entitled "Revisiting Pluralism" featuring Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law K Shanmugam.

The panel, moderated by Chan Heng Chee, also featured Zuraidah Ibrahim, Executive Managing Editor of the South China Morning Post, and Corinna Lim, Executive Director of AWARE.

A question, opened by Zuraidah's speech, prompted a back and forth about the value of political pluralism and accountability between her and Shanmugam.

Zuraidah: Singaporeans desire for more political pluralism

Zuraidah spoke about political pluralism in Singapore, saying that while Singapore considers itself culturally plural, she questioned if the same extended to political pluralism.

"The relevant questions are to my mind to what extent do our decisions as a society, factor in competing ideas and interests?"

She said that political pluralism was a relatively straightforward matter, often being settled through elections, through which "four in ten Singaporeans" consistently expressed the wish for more political pluralism and were uncomfortable with the level of PAP domination.

Zuraidah pointed out that during the 2011 presidential election, the winner, Tony Tan, could not secure a majority of the vote.

However, she felt that with former Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam — which she called "Hurricane Tharman" — as a presidential candidate, it seemed to her that 2011's close result would not be repeated.

Zuraidah noted that despite the desire for more political pluralism, with more competition and checks and balances, Singaporeans still clearly wished to retain a capable PAP government in power.

She added that the opposition Workers' Party seems to know this as well, as they were seen to be "extremely anxious to dispel any fears" that they might replace the PAP in government any time soon.

Zuraidah raised her concern that since independence, the PAP has had no experience in governing "in anything other than a supermajority", as well as "near domination of all social and political institutions".

Shanmugam: The people know what they want

Shanmugam replied during the panel's question and answer session that the people, not the PAP, decided what the current structure of parliament was.

He pointed out that Singaporeans are "highly educated" and "people know what they want".

He agreed that political pluralism looked attractive in theory, but he had not come across any country outside of Scandinavia that had made political pluralism "work for its citizens".

Shanmugam added that one also needs to consider that Singapore is "extremely small" with various "natural insecurities".

On the other hand, he also said he had studied political systems worldwide and didn't find single-party dictatorships to work either.

He further elaborated that even democracies, whether single-party or multi-party, will eventually fail to achieve their country's full potential.

"If you were to look at the practice of politics, you will come away deeply pessimistic about the ability of any political system to deliver good governance."

No system can guarantee success

He then wanted people to look at Singapore now and said that if someone asked him if there's another system that would allow Singapore to achieve what it has now, he wouldn't be able to give a clear answer.

While Shanmugam pointed out that Singapore's system had worked thus far is not a guarantee that it would continue working, he cautioned against "copying somebody else's model".

"I will say this: When your political systems resemble that of others, then you must be prepared for the results to resemble their history."

Ultimately, he said, it is up to Singaporeans to choose good leaders "in whichever system they want" and whether they want more or less pluralism.

Tharman is not anyone's patsy

On the topic of Tharman running for president, Shanmugam said that when the subject was brought up, he thought that if it had been a different candidate, people would have said that there wasn't a strong candidate.

Further pointing out the absurdity, he said, "Does anybody think that he is anyone's patsy, you know, that someone asked him to stand, and he stands?"

He emphasised that Tharman made his own decision and made up his own mind.

While he agreed that some things "should probably be laid at our [PAP's] door", he believed that some things the PAP should not be held responsible for and felt it should be on other "good candidates" to come forward.

Shanmugam: "The population make us accountable"

Zuraidah added that she did not fundamentally disagree but said, "I think it's not about binary or false choices", but about whether Singapore was happy with the current system and whether it could do better or whether it was happy with "a concentration of power, or more accountable power".

Shanmugam acknowledged that there is a "concentration of power" in Singapore because of the ruling party's supermajority but he "never believed that we are not accountable" and emphasised that "we are highly accountable in Singapore".

"We are accountable for everything that we do, and the opposition, smalls as it is, makes sure.

And anyway, the population will make us accountable."