

Progress S'pore Party's Michelle Lee asks IPS speakers about 'rivalry' between Hong Kong & S'pore

Bilahari Kausikan reminded the audience that the British ruled Hong Kong as a colony, not a democracy.

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Mothership, 21 January 2020

Hong Kong was on the minds of the audience members of the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives Conference on Jan 2020.

Michelle Lee, the newly-appointed Vice-Chairman of the Progress Singapore Party (PSP), had a question for the panel of speakers who earlier discussed the state of politics in Singapore.

She first thanked panellist Zuraidah Ibrahim, Deputy Executive Editor of the South China Morning Post, who earlier said that PSP Secretary-General Tan Cheng Bock would be a "potential game changer" in the next general election.

Lee said: "Thank you again for saying that Dr. Tan could be a potential game changer in the next elections, and I will be sure to convey this to him."

Why compare?

Lee then asked about Hong Kong, Singapore, and the "national psyches" between the two:

"In Singapore, in the news, I've noticed a tendency, whenever there are international studies that we score very well in, that these are, sort of, very proudly banded about. Whereas, there are international studies where we score much lower, and we tend to gloss over them.

Conversely, in Hong Kong newspapers — because I lived there for some time before — I often see news articles about how Hong Kong is losing out to Singapore, that there's...how can they better compete with Singapore?

So my question is, what do you think this slant shows about our national psyche, or do you think it shows something about our national psyche? And will this prevent us from being more competitive, prevent us from striving to be better, and hinder our awareness of how quickly other countries are developing?"

Sense of rivalry between Singapore and Hong Kong

Zuraidah answered, drawing on her personal experiences of being a Singaporean working in Hong Kong.

She said that she felt Hongkongers tend to compare themselves to Singapore, as both were former British colonies.

But she added there's a sense that Singapore has advanced further than Hong Kong, and this is borne out by the "numbers".

Zuraidah pointed out that when Hong Kong was handed over to China by the British in 1997, its GDP per capita was higher than Singapore's. But today, Singapore is doing better.

Zuraidah felt that there was an element of rivalry between the cities:

"I think the reality is that there's a sense of disappointment that, you know, "we [Hong Kong] were named one of Asia's world cities, financially we look very good, we're doing very well...but why is it that there's this other little city out there in Southeast Asia that's doing just as well?"

So there is a sense of rivalry and competition that I think the newspapers are only trying to reflect."

She also felt that Singapore had become more "cosmopolitan" and Hong Kong wasn't a so-called competitor, and that it only came back on our radar when the protests started happening.

Hong Kong's unique identity

In response to Lee on Hong Kong's national psyche, Lam said that his sense was that younger Hongkongers were taught by teachers who were anti-China, as there are a few generations of Hongkongers who have migrated from mainland China to Hong Kong who tend to be critical of China.

"So you see students in Hong Kong, in terms of value and identity, they do not identify themselves with the Chinese mainland.

Singapore is very, very different. Our national education is pro-Singapore. Hong Kong's education is anti-China. Okay, I hate it put it in such stark words."

However, Zuraidah said she didn't think it was that "cut-and-dried", and there was still a sizeable pro-establishment camp.

She added that support for the mainland "waxed and waned" and changes over time, citing Hong Kong's support for the Beijing Olympics and donating money to help those affected by the Sichuan earthquake.

Instead, she said that Hongkongers have their own sense of unique identity, of being relatively free, and she feels that narrative is what is keeping the movement alive, as Hongkongers feel that Beijing is infringing on this.

Was the clash between Hong Kong and mainland China inevitable?

A student from United World College of South East Asia asked if the unrest in Hong Kong was "inevitable" due to the "British values" of the Hongkongers, and Beijing's inability to make significant concessions.

Bilahari Kausikan, former Ambassador and Chairman of the Middle East Institute fielded the question.

He said that there's always agency, but it has to be tempered with a sense of reality.

Bilahari added: "And the balance between exercising agency and recognising reality is actually a core political skill."

Bilahari said that the government of Carrie Lam, Chief Executive of Hong Kong, was very good at the "routine processes" of government, such as making sure the garbage is collected, providing electricity and making the trains run, as were her predecessors.

Lack of good political governance in Hong Kong

However, Bilahari said: "(They) were miserable at political aspects of governance."

He added:

"Now, I don't see any alternative trajectory for Hong Kong that can possibly mitigate more violence in the process, but this path was set quite some time ago. It was set when the British decided to return Hong Kong to Chinese rule.

The political grievances — the socioeconomic political grievances — that underly the protests, you see, can possibly be mitigated if there was good political governance, which does not exist at present."

He reminded the audience that the British ruled Hong Kong as a "damn colony", not a democracy, and that Hongkongers were subjects of Britain, not citizens.

He said that it was only at the very end of their rule in Hong Kong that the British "raised expectations" that they never fulfilled while they were in charge.

Singapore cannot remain complacent

Harinder Pal Singh of the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) then asked if Singapore was too much in its comfort zone to dismiss the possibility of the unrest in Hong Kong ever happening in Singapore.

Bilahari answered and said that he agreed that complacency was the biggest issue facing Singapore today.

However, he did not think that Singapore was being complacent. He pointed to the fact that Ministers have been repeatedly saying that Singapore is headed into uncharted territory. Added Bilahari:

"But that does not mean we cannot fall into complacency. We cannot become complacent. And if that happens, we are done for."