

## Singapore deputy PM warns opposition on exploiting social splits

**Dylan Loh**

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SINGAPORE -- With Singapore widely expected to hold a general election this year, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on Monday warned political parties not to use "divisive rhetoric" to gain support.

Heng is tipped to succeed Lee Hsien Loong, the current prime minister and son of modern Singapore's founder, Lee Kuan Yew. Speaking at a political forum, Heng cautioned that the city-state has seen "nativist tendencies," citing conversations around the topic of immigrants.

Singapore's newest opposition party, the Progress Singapore Party, which is backed by Lee Hsien Yang, the estranged brother of the prime minister, last year called for tighter controls on foreign labor in a challenge to the country's ruling People's Action Party ahead of the election, which must be called by April 2021.

The influx of foreigners into Singapore has been a subject of heated debate in previous elections, with opposition parties playing public concerns that the livelihoods of Singaporeans are at stake and arguing that migrant workers threaten to take jobs from locals.

"If we do not act decisively, and if we allow these forces [populist] to creep up on us, our hopes and concerns can be exploited to create fear and anger. Our diversity can be turned against us, our unity can fray and our society can wither," Heng said at the gathering sponsored by the Institute of Policy Studies, which included members of opposition parties, public servants, academics and students.

Heng noted that in other countries fault lines have deepened as far-right political parties exploit people's fears and frustrations, advocating protectionism to win votes.

"In Asia, it has been more than seven months since mass rallies and violent protests erupted in Hong Kong. While we have fared better than most, we are not immune to the same divisive forces that have swept across the world," he said.

Heng said the government has acted to safeguard the interests of Singaporeans by increasing investment in education and implementing programs to help workers upgrade their skills.

"As we embark on a new decade, we will face a world marked by differences. As a small nation, we will be buffeted by these forces. We must continue to work with like-minded countries to bridge divides between countries and to tackle global common challenges," he said.

Heng was questioned by opposition politician Goh Meng Seng, secretary-general of the People's Power Party, on Singapore's readiness to turn immigrants into citizens. "We may give citizenship to people from mainland China, but they will always have this core... allegiance (that) will not change overnight. Will this affect our policies?" Goh asked.

Heng replied by cautioning that the subject of new citizens can be a source of division in Singapore if people cast doubt on the loyalty of newcomers.

"We should, as Singaporeans, make the best effort to integrate [immigrants] into our society, to welcome them so that they can be part of our team. And in that regard, I must say that I am very troubled that so many people are seeking to exploit these differences," Heng said.