

## Pondering what may come

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At Singapore Perspectives 2017 on 23 January, academics, public servants, business leaders, practitioners and students were invited to imagine Singapore's future in 2065 assuming that the conditions for the country's success no longer exist. Themed "What If?", the conference was organised by the [Institute of Policy Studies \(IPS\)](#), a research centre of the [Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy \(LKY School\)](#) at NUS.

The first panel session on the topic "Looking Out" was moderated by Professor Tommy Koh, IPS Special Adviser. NUS University Professor and LKY School founding chairman Professor Wang Gungwu said that in his view, the nation-state is a relatively new concept. "I'm not sure if it [the nation-state] has ever been the key organising unit of the world," he shared. Highlighting the collapse of the Soviet Union and the division of Yugoslavia, he added that the sovereignty of a nation-state should not be taken for granted as there is no guarantee that a nation-state, once given sovereignty, would be able to maintain it. Ending on a sombre note, Prof Wang believed that small powers have been getting weaker, relative to big powers, in the last 50 years.

The session included a lively exchange of views among the panellists followed by questions from the audience. Queries included whether the US would use the One-China policy as a bargaining chip; how Singapore could survive if globalisation fails; and the impact on Singapore and the region if the US withdrew from the area in terms of defence.

At the hotly-anticipated final panel session, Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) and Mr Ho Kwon Ping, NUS alumnus and Executive Chairman, Banyan Tree Holdings Limited spoke on the possibility of Singapore becoming a two- or multi-party system.

Mr Ong said that a two- or multi-party system, while a drastic departure from the status quo, cannot be ruled out. This could result in intense political jostling on the ground which could lead to split affiliations among entities such as associations, clubs and societies. The civil service could also be severely affected when policies are changed; more so when changes are frequent.

Mr Ong also shared his thoughts on the major risks that could befall Singapore if a two- or multi-party system takes root, one of them being whether key political differences between parties involved manageable issues or over racial, language and religious aspects. "We know that politics and race, language, religion is a toxic mix. If we moved into that position, we will be broken as a country and as a society," he said. Mr Ong pointed out that the single party system had worked well for Singapore and the majority of Singaporeans. "It still gets my vote as the best system for Singapore," he declared.

That said, Mr Ong is open to the idea of the People's Action Party (PAP) no longer being the ruling party. "The [single] party may be PAP today but it may be some other party down the road, so long as it is the most capable party to serve Singaporeans," he shared.

Responses from the floor included questions on what would happen if the PAP failed to attract sufficient good people, whether the PAP could rule Singapore forever; and whether Singapore has gained from PAP's loss in 2011.

At other panel sessions, speakers discoursed on non-economic indicators as a measure of a county's progress; whether Singapore could ignore race and religion; what would happen if the family was no longer the fundamental building block of society; and whether the country could stop accepting immigrants.

The 2017 edition of the annual conference at Raffles City Convention Centre saw close to a thousand attendees.