

IPS-Nathan Lectures: Ho Kwon Ping on Politics and Governance

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That the People's Action Party (PAP) has been in power since independence is a fact not to be taken for granted. More important, however, is to critically assess the sustainability of their rule, the challenges to their legitimacy, and governance in Singapore over the next 50 years. These deliberations set the framework for the inaugural IPS-Nathan lecture by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, the 2014/15 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

The first public lecture, "Politics and Governance", is one in a series of five lectures collectively titled ["Singapore: The Next Fifty Years"](#). Professor Tommy Koh, Special Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), introduced Mr Ho and cited him as someone who had "excelled in all his professional endeavours". "I am confident that we will find his lecture a model of clarity, critical thinking and eloquence," said Prof Koh.

More than 300 people, including students, business people, academics and civil servants attended the lecture on 20 October 2014 at the University Cultural Centre. Former President S R Nathan was the guest of honour.

Three Elephants

Mr Ho began by identifying issues and assumptions that would orientate the rest of his series of lectures, which he referred to as his "Three Elephants".

The First Elephant — the assumption of national sovereignty in the next 50 years — had implications for national cohesion. He elaborated that without an external threat to galvanise us, issues of internal cohesion would be a greater challenge to achieve in the coming half century than the previous one.

His Second Elephant pointed to alternative trajectories to the Singapore Story, which has been characterised by economic success so far. The central task of the younger generation, he said, was to match Singapore's past economic progress with "a more holistic maturation in other spheres of life", in order for the "flowering of the Singapore garden".

The biggest player in Singapore's political arena, the PAP and its dominance of "almost the entire national culture", was Mr Ho's Third Elephant. The sustainability of this dominance, he said, was a major reason for concern heading into the next 50 years.

PAP: Future Scenarios

The PAP has been in power for 55 continuous years. Other founding political parties such as the Kuomintang of Taiwan lasted for 56 years, while the Congress Party of India had 49 such years of continuous rule. As such, historical trends show that “democratically elected ruling parties have generally floundered after about half a century to three-quarters of a century,” Mr Ho said.

Mr Ho described Singapore’s political equilibrium as a static and stable one with the PAP its consistent ruling party. He contrasted this with the example of the United Kingdom, where “Blair after Thatcher, Cameron after Blair” pointed towards the pendulum swings of a dynamically stable equilibrium, describing this as a self-correcting mechanism an entire nation can undertake regularly.

He then outlined the three possible scenarios facing the PAP in the next 50 years, before rating the likelihood of each scenario happening in 15-year timeframes ([refer to pages 8–9 of the speech](#)).

He proceeded to give three possibilities for the loss of PAP rule in the coming elections ([refer to pages 10–12 of the speech](#)) and pointed to the Workers’ Party (WP) being the likely biggest political beneficiary. Upon its establishment as an entrenched party in parliament, he predicted that the WP would face the going both easier and harder — it would have more organisational resources to expand, but its previous status as the political underdog would erode, leading to higher public expectations.

The Future of Governability in Singapore

He then identified several trends affecting governability in future: the erosion of the government’s ability to control information; the increasingly polarising fault lines of society; the diminution of political leadership; the ability to maintain an ethos of egalitarianism in an increasingly unequal society; and the social anomie that characterises a society of affluence absent of any other motivation. Mr Ho’s advice to the Singapore civil service was to develop its own sense of self, ethos and values, so that they could develop a robust and resilient culture and identity. This would help ensure that they do not become “divided and uncertain, should more young civil servants hold opposing views from the ruling party”.

He devoted the last portions of his lecture to his thoughts on today’s younger generation, noting that he was encouraged that the young people he met displayed neither the “hubris nor the immobilising self-doubt” that plagued those of his generation. They were optimistic, had a broad vision of what Singapore meant as a home to them, and were pursuing more encompassing aspirations, transcending the traditional uni-dimensional hunt for economic prosperity.

Future Elections and how Singapore Society has Changed

During the 30-minute question-and-answer session moderated by IPS Director Janadas Devan, members of the audience asked Mr Ho for his thoughts on the next election and the state of governance in Singapore. Asked if the policy improvements of the past couple of

years would positively impact the PAP at the next General Election, Mr Ho said that he “had no clear view” of how the PAP would fare. He had heard of Singaporeans who wanted an “entrenched opposition” but pointed out that he had not interacted with anyone who had expressed a desire for a complete change in government.

One sentiment he had heard, he said, was that the members of the older generation would “swing” back to the PAP because they felt more taken care of lately. But he said that his general sense was that the longer a ruling party stays in power, the harder they would find to maintain the same quantum of support. “[I’m citing this] just as a pure historical trend and not talking about any specific election,” he concluded.

A member of the audience asked if Mr Ho thought the PAP would accept defeat if the opposition won enough votes to form the government. Mr Ho said he believed the PAP would accept such an outcome. “This ruling party, I think, plays by the rules although they push [them] a little bit.”

Historically, he said, all ruling founding parties that have lost elections do get voted back in. Singapore’s ruling party, he said, was wise enough to recognise that if it lost, it could bide its time and win in future, “but that disallowing the democratic process to proceed would destroy Singapore”.

The recent move by the Media Development Authority of Singapore to disallow public screenings of director Tan Pin Pin’s work, *To Singapore, With Love*, was also brought up. Mr Ho described this as “a missed opportunity” by the government to educate Singaporeans that there was a “hard ruthless struggle for the soul of Singapore”. Watching the film, he said, would allow for younger Singaporeans to better appreciate the Singapore they had inherited, “because the system that we live under today would have been much better than the system that would have existed if [the communists] had won.”

He added: “I found it unfortunate because I think it would actually have helped to illustrate the reality of what the PAP went through and how they made the right decision. The battle that Lee Kuan Yew had to fight was a real battle, with real people that are not just in history books.”

Responding to other questions, Mr Ho discussed the ethos of egalitarianism that he thought was fundamental to Singapore society, and his definition of political legitimacy. Pure income inequality would always exist, he stated, but what was more important was that an ethos of egalitarianism prevailed within an unequal society. If, however, more wealth-flaunting behaviours flourished, more social tensions and problems would arise, he said. Political legitimacy, he said, was not necessarily determined by a country’s political system. Leaders could be elected but people would know if they had got there by populist promises or corruption, for instance. What would confer a huge amount of legitimacy on a leader, said Mr Ho, was their display of “servant leadership”. “True legitimacy can only be conferred upon leaders whom people see as genuinely acting in their best interests,” he said.

Wrapping up his dialogue with the audience, Mr Ho returned to his optimism about the younger generation and contrasted their attitude towards living in Singapore with that of his

peers. “In my generation, we generally sat around and griped,” he quipped, adding that the government was “so over-dominant” then that it provoked two extreme reactions from people — they either liked what was happening or would criticise what they didn’t like. In contrast, young people today did not see the government as the “centre of everything”, which they either loved or complained about.

“People just go out now and do what they want to do: express themselves. This sense of self-agency, I think, is much stronger now among young people than it was during my time, and it is this same sense of self-agency which, if it crosses to the majority of young Singaporeans, gives me hope for the future of Singapore.”

Established in 2013, the [S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore](#) aims to advance public understanding and discussion of issues of critical national interest. The first S R Nathan Fellow was appointed in July 2014.

Andrew Yeo is a Research Assistant (Special Projects) at IPS, and contributes to the work of the S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

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