



IPS-Nathan Lectures: Ho Kwon Ping on Security and Sustainability

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Security was discussed through the four dimensions of external, internal, civil and societal security, and specific policies were examined in terms of their sustainability for the next 50 years of Singapore's development at the third IPS-Nathan Lecture, titled "Security and Sustainability".



(From left): SR Nathan Fellow Ho Kwon Ping and Ambassador Ong Keng Yong engaging the audience

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, the 2014/15 SR Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, called for more checks and balances to the Internal Security Act (ISA), a moratorium on judicial corporal punishment, possibly introducing National Service (NS) for Singaporean women, and for society to begin discussing sensitive issues of race and religion with more transparency and

candour. The lecture was moderated by Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, the Executive Deputy Chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

National Service

Singapore's demographic challenge of an ageing population will impact NS. Citing statistics by the United Nations in a no-change scenario (which presumes current Total Fertility Rates and no in-migration), Mr Ho cautioned that in 50 years' time, the same male NS-age cohort would be less than half its size today. He pointed to trends in Scandinavian countries where women are drafted into the army as well as men, and the United States where, by 2016, all army positions will become available to women.

He proposed a system where national service for females could last for several months, during the waiting period between transitioning to educational institutions. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Ministry of Education (MOE) and our Civil Defence Forces could take the lead, he said, with the Ministry of Defence only providing necessary technical support. Universal female conscription, he said, would serve two distinct but related purposes. It would firstly instil an ethos of national service in women. Secondly, should military service ever become necessary, the challenge would then no longer be attitudinal, but a logistical and technical issue to resolve, he said.

Internal Security Act

While he acknowledged the tension between preventive detention and civil liberties, Mr Ho noted that Western governments had grudgingly accepted these measures as a necessary means to combat the threat of terrorism in their own societies. He thus focused his concern on enhanced checks and balances on the ISA to ensure it would not be abused.

Mr Ho proposed an unconditional and unconstrained reduction in the detention period from two years to one. He also called for subsequent detention periods to require a higher degree of external review than currently provided for, by having two high court justices rather than the current single judge and two persons appointed by the President. Failure to achieve unanimous approval for further detention would trigger a process of further review by a non-partisan panel comprising members of the legislature, which in a parliamentary system with at least some opposition representation would have the ability to differentiate between security threats and political abuses. "The point is that potential abuse resides in any government with unconstrained powers, regardless of political heritage or ideology," he said.

Judicial Corporal Punishment

Mr Ho outlined two arguments against caning — first, the notion that it is barbaric in and of itself; second, that in many instances, caning was not morally proportionate to the crime because it is also used for non-violent offences. Mr Ho noted that there was a lack of public demand to end caning, but he felt it necessary to raise the issue as Singapore aspires towards an increasingly humane and civilised society.

He said that criminological studies highlight how it is not so much the severity of the punishment that is the main deterrent to crime, but the speed at which the offender is caught

and the consistency by which the punishment is speedily applied. He thus proposed a moratorium on caning, which, if successful, could possibly lead to a moratorium on capital punishment. “Ultimately, in the march of humanity towards civilisation, one consistent marker throughout all these centuries, is how society punishes its offender and not just how it rewards its heroes,” he said.

Social Cohesiveness

Mr Ho lauded the government’s fundamental approach to societal security, praising their ability to vigorously promote a multicultural and multiracial society. Equality of opportunity for all communities was never just an aspiration or ideal in Singapore, but an imperative for survival, he said. He, however, stated his belief in doing more to enhance social cohesion in Singapore, and proposed the gradual and careful opening up of the social space to discuss sensitive topics such as race and religion. He said he hoped for fewer and fewer out-of-bound markers.

He also suggested some form of NS liability for new male citizens, noting that local national servicemen recognise the value of immigrants to Singapore’s economy but feel that these individuals have received Singaporean citizenship without making the necessary sacrifices. Employers who prefer to hire new citizens because they have no reservist liability do not help, he said. A solution could be “a three-month programme which would not need full-residential training, but would impart civil defence, para-medical and para-police training, and with annual reservist liability of a week or two for several years,” he said. While this would not be favoured by new citizens who only want the convenience of a Singapore passport and may lead to a half in such applications, he quipped that it would not necessarily be a bad thing.

“For those who genuinely want Singapore to be their home, the opportunity to integrate more into our society and be able to also say with pride that they too, serve the country and sacrifice for it, such a programme may even be welcomed, provided that the disruption to their lives is not enormous,” he said.

Discussion

Members of the 200-strong audience asked a variety of questions. On the ISA, Mr Chew Kheng Chuan, Chairman of the Substation, asked how Mr Ho, who had previously been detained under the ISA himself could support an Act that had been “absolutely abused” in Singapore’s history. Mr Chew was also detained in 1987 under the ISA for his involvement in an alleged “Marxist Conspiracy”.

Mr Ho said the issue was an “emotional” one for him and his friends, who included Mr Chew. But in light of the security threats that have emerged and threaten to fracture society, he could not completely disagree with the Act, he said. Looking at some of the threats other societies in the West face, Mr Ho said that if he were the Prime Minister of Singapore today, he would not be able to honestly call for the absolute abolition of the ISA because he felt that preventive detention was still a necessary measure in certain circumstances. His biggest concern, he elaborated, was thus the potential abuse of preventive detention by a

government for illegitimate reasons related to its own survival, as opposed to the survival of society. He referred back to the points he made in his lecture about checking potential abuse of the Act.

Discussions of race and religion — two extremely sensitive topics — were also brought up. A member of the audience asked Mr Ho for his opinion on when Singapore would be mature enough to discuss issues of race and religion more openly. The member shared that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others framework limits assimilation, and expressed hope for a Singapore where Singaporeans feel closer to fellow Singaporeans regardless of ethnic groups in order to develop a better sense of nationhood. Mr Ho acknowledged the member's points, saying that these were discussions worth having. In broad terms, issues of race and religion had to be openly and robustly discussed. However, he noted that there were specific issues that might still be too sensitive to discuss in the public domain, conceding that he "might not be sufficiently *au fait* with the whole flow of things in Singapore and overseas".

There were a few comments and questions on elitism and how Singaporeans of different backgrounds did not mix as freely as in the past. A student from a well-known school spoke about the "gap" between students from top schools and those who had chosen other educational paths. The former, she said, had initially thought — until interactions proved them wrong — that those who went to vocational schools were from a "different world" from them. Mr Ho pointed out that this was "a serious problem on many levels", noting that children of well-off families are likely to go to elite schools in Singapore. Describing this as an "insidious problem that the MOE is well aware of", he acknowledged efforts by Minister Heng Swee Keat aimed at levelling the field. He also called for volunteers to only volunteer "out of an attitude of true empathy". Schools and institutions, he said, had a part to play in "conscientising the youths today", so much so that people see volunteering no longer as just helping the other, but also as a form of self-improvement through mutual interactions with the other.

A member of the audience then pointed out that national servicemen with similar educational backgrounds were often grouped together in the Singapore Armed Forces. This was the "loss of an opportunity to allow Singaporeans to understand each other as being all from the same stock, not elites and the others," he said, describing his time as a former army regular. Mr Ho, in agreeing with the member, recollected his days as a platoon commander in the army, saying he learnt to respect all kinds of people, realising that he "wasn't the great smart guy" he perceived himself to be.

Ambassador Ong brought the dialogue to a close by conveying his confidence in Singaporeans' solid ability to find solutions to problems they might face in the next 50 years. "We will find our way, and discussions such as these might reflect some of our own doubts, but it is also good because some of these responses show we are not doing too bad," he said.

Mr Ho said he hoped he had encouraged younger Singaporeans to ponder the big issues of their future. A willingness to change with the times, he said, would prevent the intellectual rigidity that weakens the sustainability of Singapore society. "By starting this public

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conversation now, we can build the capacity for discourse and reasoning which should benefit those Singaporeans who will inherit this nation,” he concluded.

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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.

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