

Amid change, some things remain constant in S'pore

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In contemplating Singapore's next 50 years, public intellectual Ho Kwon Ping focused recently on the staying power of the People's Action Party, which has ruled the country uninterrupted since 1959 and led it to independence in 1965.

He sketched three scenarios in which it could lose power: a freak election, a party split, or an anticipated loss to the opposition.

These scenarios might appear like conventional wisdom to some, but they would alarm those who wonder what the future might hold that the past has not taught the present.

It is impossible to say what the next half-century might hold in store, but whoever rules Singapore is likely to discover before too long that certain fundamentals need to be preserved to keep it going.

Multi-racialism, meritocracy, secularism and incorruptibility in public life are founding ideals which most Singaporeans believe their country should remain committed to, and uphold in word and deed.

These are, or have become, almost akin to the country's reason for being.

Less tangible but no less real is Singapore's ability to take the long view.

A country blessed with an abundance of people and geography can afford to look inwards and live in the short term, for a while: A city-state devoid of natural resources, alas, cannot enjoy such luxuries.

In an unrelenting struggle for survival, at least two other Singaporean resources are pre-eminent. The reserves are the first.

Built up over decades of fiscal frugality, they embody a concrete commitment to future generations. In that context, welfare is not necessarily dangerous, but dependency is.

Political populism could transform welfare into dependency by undermining the ethic of self-reliance and collective care for the future.

The balance once struck between fiscal prudence and social cohesion cannot but shift to reflect the demands of an economically more diversified society today, but leaving a legacy for the next generation surely must count as the present's contribution to the next 50 years.

Defence is the second resource. Hardly anything could be more misleading than to believe that Singapore will be safe from invasion or subversion because it has been spared till now.

It has survived because of the deterrent ability of its armed forces, credible enough to give potential predators long second thoughts.

The presence of a citizens' army built through National Service is at the core of that deterrence.

The rise of non-state actors that seek to destroy democratic and secular systems through violence is a new type of threat, but the answer to it lies in the long-established need for strong military and psychological defence.

Whoever takes charge of Singapore, some realities won't change.