

Ex-ISA detainee sees need for Act but urges changes **Ho Kwon Ping also calls for phasing out caning, and starting NS for women**

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh & Rachel Chang

The Straits Times, 6 February 2015

BUSINESSMAN Ho Kwon Ping has called for limits to Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA), under which people can be detained without trial if they are deemed to pose a threat to national security.

The one-time political detainee also called for the phasing out of caning, and the introduction of a period of national service (NS) for new male citizens and Singaporean women.

In a lecture yesterday on security and sustainability, he said Singapore must evolve to keep up with changing social values.

"A willingness to change with the times... can prevent the intellectual rigidity that weakens the sustainability of our society as a dynamic and evolving culture," he said in the third of five public lectures as the Institute of Policy Studies' first S R Nathan Fellow.

A former journalist, the 63-year-old was detained under the ISA in 1977 for writing articles with a pro-communist slant.

But yesterday, he held back from calling for the Act's abolition.

Instead, he suggested reducing the initial detention period to one year - down from the current two - and putting in more rigorous checks and balances for the subsequent periods.

As Islamic radicalism casts a pall over the world today, Singapore needs to find a balance between the Government's power to meet some threats and the space that civil society needs to express its views without fear of detention, he said.

In fact, preventive detention - once heavily criticised - has become "grudgingly accepted" by Western governments as they struggle with the terrorist threat, he said. And calls to abolish it have been watered down to calls to ensure that unconstrained power is not abused.

"What must not change is the constant awareness that any people who surrender too many extraordinary powers to any government do so at their own peril," Mr Ho cautioned.

In the hour-long dialogue after his lecture, he was pressed on the issue by Mr Chew Kheng Chuan, the chairman of theatre company The Substation. Mr Chew was detained in 1987 under the ISA for involvement in a Marxist conspiracy against the Government.

Charging that the ISA had been "absolutely abused" in Singapore's history, he said he was taken aback by Mr Ho's defence of the Act. He argued that the power of preventive detention is too "seductive" for any government to resist exploiting.

Mr Ho said the issue is an emotional one for "victims" like Mr Chew and himself, but he believes preventive detention is needed to counter certain security threats that exist today.

"The removal of the power of preventive detention could lead to more dangers, so my biggest concern is how to prevent a government from using this power for its own survival rather than for the survival of society," he said.

During the lecture, he also urged a widening of the fairways when it comes to racial and religious issues - long the most taboo of topics in Singapore.

"Societal security requires us to eventually discuss openly the most sensitive issues of race and religion, even at the risk of causing controversy overseas, or bordering into communal politics at home," he said, adding that sensitive issues are desensitised when brought into the open in responsible discussion.

He noted as well how the fault lines between long-time citizens and new arrivals might be displacing old ones of race and religion.

Touching on resentment against new male citizens who do not have to undergo NS, he suggested that those of reservist liability age go for a three-month programme to learn some NS skills.

In addition, the conscription of women must be considered seriously, to maintain Singapore's military readiness, as the pool of young men shrinks, he said.

His lecture, he hoped, would start the ball rolling in terms of the direction that Singapore should take. "Fundamental issues concerning society and what values we stand for take longer to unfold and resolve," he said.

In the audience of about 160 was sociology student Foo Jia Xin, 21, who said Mr Ho's theme of needing to develop a more mature society resonated with her.

"The topics he discusses make me realise there are so many aspects of society that still have way to go. And we have a part to play, and we can't just sit back and say: 'I can't do anything, it's beyond me!'"

Background Story

Ho Kwon Ping on...

CALLS TO SCRAP NATIONAL SERVICE

"If you take the view that we don't need NS, and (so) degrade our military (ability), you'd better hope you're right. Because you cannot make a mistake on national security. You can make a mistake on economic strategy - countries rebound after recessions. But if you make a mistake on military deterrence... we are not a Russia that can take Napoleon's invasion deep into our hinterland (and survive). I hate to sound so 'government rhetoric' but we are a small dot. And if

our young people fail to believe this and they think that military deterrence is not a necessity but a luxury, I would say it's a very dangerous situation for our young people in the next 50 years."

MORE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

"If we are going to have an active civil society, there must be much greater access to information. I think you'll find that most governments are overprotective of information.

Generally, information is power and civil servants like to give as little information away as possible. I should think that most (intellectuals and academics) would support the call for some kind of Freedom of Information Act whereby state agencies are required to disclose information that's not classified as secret."

WHY SINGAPORE CAN JETTISON CANING AS A FORM OF PUNISHMENT

"The death penalty is a punishment that's still retained by a lot of countries. Whereas caning is such an unusual punishment that you find very few countries that still practise it. I'm going for low-hanging fruits. I think it's easier, for a society like Singapore, to recognise that flogging or whipping is something that we can gradually do away with. It does not behoove a country that has gone from Third World to First to still be using this method of punishment."