

Good governance key to helping S'pore reinvent and stay relevant in post-Covid-19 world: Ong Ye Kung

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SINGAPORE - The great task for a city like Singapore in a post-Covid-19 world is to keep reinventing itself to stay relevant and competitive, said Minister for Health Ong Ye Kung, who spoke on the topic of cities at a forum on Thursday (Jan 13).

Within the confines of Singapore's 730 sq km is a city and also a country, and people have no option to choose between a freewheeling urban economic centre and a quiet life in the suburbs, he added.

Running an effective state and getting the politics right are thus key to ensuring that the small island of Singapore can accommodate all the different aspirations of its five million people, he said.

"Rather than endless bickering and stalemates, the political process must be constructive and help bridge divides. The objective of politics must be to help the country find a way forward even if the decisions involve very difficult trade-offs," he added.

"This is especially important to Singapore. For what we lack in resources and strategic mass, we can make up with nimbleness and unity of purpose and action. We may be small, but we can be fast and we do things together."

Mr Ong was giving the keynote speech on Cities, Countries and Resilience at the Singapore Perspectives 2022 forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Recounting the stories of great cities past and present, he said Singapore cannot be modelled after any one city as "we are a city, we are a state, we are also a nation of one people, all rolled into one".

Like New York City, Singapore is a modern-day metropolis as well as a global economic node that needs to be connected to the world to thrive, he said.

That is why Singapore has to be like a smartphone that runs a good operating system and hosts all the apps essential to life, "so that it is not easy, though not impossible, to switch out of Singapore", he added.

This has required constant reinvention, with Singapore leveraging its geographical location to build a trading hub, then growing strategic industries from manufacturing to biomedical sciences, and now becoming a centre for green finance, he said.

Through the pandemic, Singapore has also positioned itself as a hub for vaccine manufacturing and distribution, and should seize the opportunity to rethink how it can do things better and smarter, he added.

Describing the pandemic as a large "reset button", he said Singapore should build on the changes that Covid-19 has forced upon work, retail, education and healthcare to transform itself.

For instance, even after the health crisis, a combination of working from home and from the office will allow people to better juggle their professional and private lives, and also allow cities to alleviate the peak-hour rush that has dictated the planning and development of transport infrastructure for so long, he suggested.

The minister, who co-chairs the multi-ministry task force on Covid-19 along with Finance Minister Lawrence Wong and Trade and Industry Minister Gan Kim Yong, said coping with the pandemic has tested Singapore's mettle as a city.

He added that personal responsibility and civic consciousness have been key in helping the country ride each infection wave.

"We have to trust that people will do the right thing in testing themselves and isolating themselves if they test positive," he said.

"While these have been done out of necessity, I believe it has helped us grow as a people. I hope it is the start of a societal attitude that is more forgiving of imperfections, embracing setbacks and failures, appreciating resilience, ruggedness, enterprise and even being unconventional."

As a small city-state, Singapore is also like the imperial city of Chang An, now known as Xi'an, in China, said Mr Ong, where the government must defend the city and maintain law and order to run an effective state.

To this end, Singapore's founding generation has build up a good government with "an executive branch that is effective and can get things done, a non-politicised civil service, and a judicial system that upholds the rule of law without fear or favour", he said.

There are also democratic institutions such as the Parliament, formed through free and fair elections, he added.

Affairs of the state cannot run away from politics, which can both put the fate of the country in the hands of the people and keep powers in check when done right, but polarise the population and destabilise societies when allowed to go wrong, said Mr Ong.

Getting this right is especially crucial for Singapore, which needs unity of purpose to thrive as a small, open country, he noted.

That is why a strong state is necessary to grapple with inequality, protectionism and climate change, the starkest political issues faced by societies today, he added.

Policies need to be consistent in the long term to make an impact, instead of being reoriented with frequent changes of governments. At the same time, there must be discourse to hear and consider diverse views, and proper checks and balances, he said.

"The success of Singapore state depends on our ability to achieve both aims," he added.

Like the ancient city of Jericho, one of the oldest human settlements that was born when hunter-gatherers gathered to cultivate crops in an area with the right conditions, Singapore is also the result of people coming together to forge a common fate and destiny, said Mr Ong.

As "members of a close-knit tribe", there was "a recognition that by working together and making sacrifices for one another, we have a better shot at a brighter future", he added.

But unlike the inhabitants of Jericho who are a natural tribe of similar origins, Singaporeans are far more diverse. This makes Singapore far more complex than any ancient city, said Mr Ong, noting that a sense of nationhood is not a given and needs to be forged through a long-term and subconscious process of nation-building.

"In Singapore, we are working on what it means to be Singaporean, day by day," he said, citing examples of students singing the national anthem daily at school assemblies, different communities living side by side in Housing Board estates and young men serving national service together.

"These are all acts of nation-building. Many of these come through deliberate policies and programmes implemented by the state."

Referring to Singapore's bicentennial year in 2019, Mr Ong said people here had voted "self-determination" as what best describes the country's DNA during a public voting exercise.

"Cities don't need it; many states don't even think about it; but a young nation like us dreams of and cherishes self-determination," he added.

He said there was a growing consciousness about what it means to be Singapore - as a key node of the globalised world that connects the East and the West and creates vast opportunities for its people; a country with institutions of state that will ensure justice and fairness to all, uphold meritocracy and bridge divides; and as a nation that gives every community a place under the sun, where people give and take rather than push their own agenda at the expense of others.

"With all of these, we will determine our own future and be a city, state and nation that continues to thrive for many years to come," he added.