

PAP must be 'open-minded, attract diverse talents and constantly self-reflect'

Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung addressed the Institute of Policy Studies Singapore Perspectives Conference on Monday, where he spoke on the issue of 'What if Singapore becomes a two- or multi-party system?' Below is an edited excerpt of his speech.

Ong Ye Kung

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Let's talk about the elephant in the room - which is the People's Action Party (PAP). The scenario painted to us is that by 2065, it is replaced by several smaller elephants that will take turns to govern after each election or rule through coalitions.

It's a drastic departure from the status quo, which we cannot rule out half a century from now. Question is: What happens then? I would like to present my remarks in three parts. First, while life will change in many ways, we will adapt and life goes on. Second, I will explain why this can give rise to a couple of serious long-term risks for Singapore. Third, which is what many Singaporeans will ask: "What is the Government going to do about it?"

First, what will change and how will life go on?

A major change in a multi-party system will be the shifting of the political ground. Expect intense ground jostling - different parties reaching out to various groups to garner support. The unions may not be as cohesive as they are today, working with the PAP in a symbiotic relationship. They may be split into two or more groupings, or there will be a competing federation, like the days when we had SATU and NTUC. Likewise, there will be split affiliations among associations, clans, societies, even recreational clubs, civil societies, sociopolitical sites, sports and arts bodies, etc. Media houses can be split too.

It's not a new phenomenon. It has been the case in more hotly contested constituencies. After GE2011, when the Workers' Party won Aljunied, I found myself becoming the opposition party in the GRC.

I believe the institution that will be most tested will be the civil service. The holy grail of the civil service is to be politically neutral and serve whichever party forms the government, regardless of their differences in governance philosophy. Offer the policy options, state the pros and cons, let the political leaders with the mandate decide, and civil service will support regardless. It is a professional ideal but, in practice, easier said than done. You can work on one set of policies for five years and someone new comes along and asks you to undo everything you have done and move to a new direction. We see that now happening - the Affordable Healthcare Act in the US is being unwound, Trans-Pacific Partnership being put to a stop. That can be very frustrating and disheartening.

It is useful to see how other countries deal with it. America ended up politicising the top echelons of the civil service. The top few layers of bureaucrats are political appointees, and whenever there is a change in administration, they are all replaced. That is why the new Trump administration has to make 4,000 appointments.

The alternative is the Australian or UK system, where all civil servants in the ministries stay intact, but the minister's office is packed with his own staffers - presumably more aligned to his thinking. In Australia, the ministers spend most of their time with these staffers in Parliament, and not with the civil servants in the ministries - because Parliament is where the political contest is.

We will have to adapt to all these, which also means status quo as we know it will change. But adapt we will.

REAL RISKS

Second, I will touch on the real long-term risks for Singapore in a multi-party system. The risk is not so much being in a multi-party system per se, but what are the forces and processes that will lead us there.

For a two- or multi-party system to take shape, there must first have been at least two paths sufficiently different for our country to take. But these paths can be a narrow fork in the road that can even merge further down, or a T-junction pointing in opposite directions.

Take the UK, for example. From the mid-1990s to early 2010s, the Conservatives and New Labour in UK both believed in a pro-business, market economy that upholds equality of opportunities instead of equality in outcomes. Both eschew labour unrest and strikes - which was a major shift for New Labour. The key divergence in policy was probably in their attitudes towards the European Union. Today, that has widened into a gulf between those who believed in Brexit and Remain. That difference has split the society between the young and old, urban and rural residents, the more and less educated.

In the US, the key historical divergence between the Republicans and Democrats was slavery. The situation has evolved. Slavery is no more and, today, the two parties hold distinct views on the size of government, taxation, abortion and gun control. But in the recent presidential elections, those positions widened, pitting nationalism against globalisation, whites versus other races. It was a bitter, divisive election which both candidates openly acknowledged.

Political parties are essential in representing the diverse views of people, and elections a necessary and peaceful discourse in finding compromises and seeking a way forward for the country. This is the essence of democracy. But that same essence can take a nasty twist, sow discord and divide societies. Hence, Winston Churchill said, "...democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time".

Fifty years from now, if we have a multi-party system, what will define the key political difference between parties? What is the partisan line? Is it over the extent to which we should subsidise

public services, healthcare and social assistance? If that is so it may well be something we can manage. What if it is over something more sinister that divides Singapore by race, language or religion? As we all know politics, race and religion is a toxic mix. If that happens, we will be broken as a country and society.

Another major risk is whether a multi-party system will slow down decision-making, and our nimbleness in navigating an ever- changing external environment. If we had a multi-party system back in 1965, would we have come this far so quickly?

Back then, we could move to attract FDI (foreign direct investments) from multinational companies when it was not politically correct to do so in a post-colonial era. We forged omnidirectional, bilateral free trade agreements while others pledged allegiance to the World Trade Organisation multilateral system. We must move fast in embracing new digital technologies, even though it can be uncomfortable and disruptive.

If we envisage a future of tough challenges - a shifting geopolitical landscape, more intense economic competition, challenging demographic trends, rising sea levels - unity, common purpose and the ability to move faster than others will be central and vital for us. While other countries are either slow but big, or small but fast, will we end up suffering the worst of both worlds - small and slow?

The current system has worked well for the majority of Singaporeans so far. It still gets my vote as the best system for Singapore.

ENSURE CURRENT SYSTEM WORKS

So, given these risks, what can Government do about it?

To answer this question, let me rewind to 2011 when I was first introduced as a PAP candidate. I was asked by a journalist what I thought of a single-party system in Singapore. I said that our equilibrium as a small country may well be single-party rule. The party can be PAP today, but another in the future - so long it is the most capable at that time.

Because between Singaporeans living in Changi and Jurong, their concerns and views on national issues may be somewhat different, but nothing like those of people living in Alaska or New York City, Jakarta or the eastern and westernmost places in the Indonesian archipelago. For big countries, geographical separation translates into different lifestyles, outlook, values and political affinities, which then lends itself to multi-party politics.

The single party in the case of Singapore is not a prescription, but the most likely outcome of choice - a result of free and fair elections. It is not different from Massachusetts being dominated by Democrats for long periods, or Scotland dominated by Labour and now SNP. Smallness and concentration do often come together.

So the answer to the question, what are we going to do about it, is to make sure the current system continues to work for Singaporeans!

To do so, we must understand what factors made it work so far. Complacency, elitism and corruption are not inevitable outcomes of dominant party rule. These ills have shown up across all political systems. The PAP knows that our integrity must be unquestionable. If something goes wrong, it will be rectified and the perpetrators must face the consequences and action has to be swift.

We must be a party that is open- minded and keeps up with the changing expectations of the population - so that we can be at the forefront of new ideas, and policies can adapt to the needs of the society and our people. We must attract talent from as diverse a background as possible to serve. That is why, every term, we replace a quarter to a third of our candidates.

The PAP must constantly self-reflect, on areas that it has not done well, and why the Singapore Dream did not work out for some Singaporeans. Our policies must be rooted in the ground. A sizeable proportion of our work must be on the ground. And in this age of inequality, ours cannot just be a system which rewards the best and brightest, it must also be a system that compensates for poor family circumstance and the role of luck.

Every country in the world is different. A country's success is idiosyncratic and can never be replicated wholesale by another. The formula for success is based on different political processes. Singapore's formula may well be a single-party system.

Ultimately, the political future of a country will be determined by the will of the people. If the people wish for a change to a multi-party system, it will be so. The job of the opposition parties is to highlight to people the risks of the current system. Likewise, it is the job of the PAP to do our best to make sure Singapore flourishes, point out the risks of a multi-party system for a small country like Singapore, and keep out the ills of complacency, elitism and corruption.