

Securing Nation over next 50 years

The Straits Times, 14 February 2015

PUBLIC intellectual Ho Kwon Ping's recent reflections on Singapore's security perspectives and practices probe the limitations of continuity for the sake of stability. Looking ahead, change is inevitable but the manner in which this is managed is not. The evolutionary approach that he advocates is preferred as there are differing constituencies of opinion on how external and internal security could be liberalised while preserving the state's core ability to protect citizens from threats emerging beyond and within its shores.

Change is indeed already occurring. Witness the exception made to the once-mandatory death penalty for drug traffickers. Since this change does not represent a softening of Singapore's anti-trafficking stance but a new way of upholding the deterrent intention of anti-trafficking laws, a similar intellectual expansiveness might be applied conceivably to other areas of domestic security.

Could the purview of caning as a punishment, for example, be restricted to better targeted crimes rather than the current list that ranges from kidnapping to vandalism? Mr Ho is right to qualify that any change should be effected in a studied way so tough laws to deal with grave threats do not lose their sting. The purpose of change should be to conserve core principles of criminal justice while acknowledging the maturing of society and any aversion to be likened to the brutal systems of hardline regimes.

The Internal Security Act (ISA), which permits detention without trial, is a crucial legislative arena. The existential threat of terrorism has obliged many in Western and other societies to acknowledge the merit of certain draconian laws to check its cancerous growth. The object is to prevent a minority of extremists from attacking the freedom of the majority. Preventive laws help to enhance the security that allows liberal societies to function in the first place. Singapore's use of the ISA against secular insurgents in the past and religious militants today need to be also seen in that light. Even Mr Ho, a former ISA detainee himself, now acknowledges this. Nevertheless, he is right too when he urges that safeguards against possible abuse be constantly reviewed.

A purely legal framework cannot secure society. A different approach is needed to deal with, for example, divisions created by demographic change, including mindsets imported by new residents and citizens not yet acclimatised to the inclusive nature of society here. What would safeguard the key principles of the Singapore way of life would be daily manifestations of those at work. Singaporeans, who know the value of a society that is secure and at peace with itself, must do all it takes to strengthen it.