

Five thought-provoking quotes from Ho Kwon Ping's first IPS Nathan Lecture

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SINGAPORE - What the next 50 years holds for Singapore's sociopolitical scene was the subject of the first Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)-Nathan Lecture delivered by businessman and one-time political prisoner Ho Kwon Ping on Monday.

Mr Ho, the executive chairman of hotel group Banyan Tree Holdings, spoke for about an hour on the expected "dramatic" changes in politics and governance in the coming half century.

As IPS' first S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, Mr Ho will hold four more public lectures in this series over the coming months. They will look at what Singapore can expect in the next 50 years in the areas of economy and business, society and identity, demography and family and security and sustainability.

Below are five of the choicest quotes from his first lecture on politics and governance, held at the National University of Singapore's University Cultural Centre:

On what to expect in the second act of the Singapore story:

"Because the foundations of economic growth and the pillars of political stability have already been laid, today's young generation can - and will - define and then set out to achieve its own definition of what a developed society means in terms of social justice, an egalitarian culture, political maturity, cultural creativity, and all the other markers of the truly exceptional nation which we can be...

"It becomes obvious, then, that it is in the domestic socio-cultural and political realms that change will be the most evident and the most dramatic in the next 50 years. These changes will also involve a process of continual self-invention, so that the Singapore narrative, while hopefully remaining vibrant and relevant in a constantly evolving world, may not necessarily resemble what it was before."

On the future of the People's Action Party (PAP):

"The PAP will face a challenge to retain the same degree of control over Parliament as it has had in the past. So long as the very popular current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remains in control - not only as Prime Minister but as Senior Minister or Minister Mentor like his predecessors, the mantle of legitimacy can perhaps be extended to younger leaders. But even Mr Lee will be in his 80s by three more elections. The challenge will be considerable from then onwards...

"Historical trends elsewhere point towards an election loss by the PAP in the second half of the next 50 years. Or to put it another way, it would be extraordinary if that did not happen."

On what might cause the PAP to lose an election:

"There are three basic possibilities: first, an accidental or freak election. Second, a split within the PAP resulting in a loss to an opposition party which might not otherwise be stronger than an united PAP. And third, an anticipated, outright loss to an opposition party...

"Of these three possible causes for loss of power, which have the greatest likelihood of occurring? I would rate the first possibility - a freak election - as having the highest chance, followed by an internal split, and the least likely is an outright, widely predicted loss. But this is a quite arbitrary stab in the dark.

"In all likelihood, it is the interplay and combination of these three scenarios in different ways, which will pose a challenge for the PAP and its scenario-planners in future decades."

On how today's youths see government:

"They regard the government and the PAP as a matter of fact - not a saviour, nor a tyrant, but somewhat like a parent who is respected but who must be grown out of. Clearly, a paternalistic political culture is not going to excite, much less retain, the loyalty of younger Singaporeans...

"What unites them all is the immediacy of self-agency; not waiting around for somebody else to do something you think is needed, but doing it yourself. This kind of political DIY or Do-It-Yourself attitude has in the past decade encouraged a participatory democracy which resembles Singapore's early years, but which then surrendered to decades of developmental authoritarianism."

His advice for young Singaporeans below 35:

"If we do not accept, almost as a point of faith, that our economic progress must now be matched by a more holistic maturation in other spheres of life, and that this flowering of the Singapore garden is the central task of your generation, then we are fated to either decline through thoughtless hubris, or flounder in equally thoughtless self-doubts and anxieties."