

Views split on pace at which S'pore is opening up

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SINGAPORE is opening up and just how fast - or slow - it is taking dominated discussions at a forum yesterday, with a minister pledging that it would gather pace, but two commentators saying they were unconvinced.

Being plugged into the global economy has led to significant changes in society here, including in Government-people relations, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan said.

Singaporeans were awakening politically and the level of debate and discourse was more sophisticated, and noticeably louder, he said at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual seminar.

Sharing the stage with political commentators Catherine Lim and Ho Khai Leong, who differed with him over the pace of change, he cited the process of public consultations, such as over the integrated resorts, and devolving authority to grassroots groups to help needy residents.

The Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister told the 700 participants that he believed there would be more issues floated by the Government for public discussion before decisions are taken.

'As politicians and policymakers, we would be truly foolish not to hear and address legitimate views genuinely and meaningfully, especially when we contemplate radical changes,' he said.

Singapore's move towards a more open society would not be reversed, he added. Political debate would be louder, both within and outside the ruling People's Action Party, even if it retained political dominance.

But Dr Lim, an author, and Dr Ho, a fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies, felt little had changed and said the Government had a long way to go in fostering genuine political openness.

What they agreed on was that Singaporeans valued security, jobs, public services and prosperity - and this was why the Government received political support despite concerns it was not liberalising fast enough.

Issues of openness here were in the spotlight last year, noted Dr Ho.

Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders ranked Singapore's press freedom among the lowest in the world; the University of Warwick dropped plans for a campus here, citing concerns about intellectual and academic freedom; and former United States ambassador Franklin Lavin was surprised by constraints on discussions given Singapore's openness to the world.

And on Wednesday, financier George Soros said Singapore could not be considered an open society. But he noted that prosperity and open society went together, and cited the desire for greater openness and an enlightened leadership here.

Dr Balakrishnan said yesterday that encouraging greater public participation had an impact on politics and governance, and was one of the Government's broad responses to globalisation.

Alluding to recent riots in France and Australia, he said, however, that because of the nature of society here, Singapore would be 'cautiously radical rather than ideologically revolutionary' on issues of political freedom.

Dr Lim saw this issue differently.

The high regard other countries had for the Government and Singapore's economic success meant that there was less pressure to open up here.

That was a reason why the Government could afford to suppress political dissent at home, even though the need for such dissent 'can never be stopped', she said.

'The political domain remains a backwater,' she added.

She argued that the Government had 'a natural distaste of the noise of political debate and dissent', even as it sought to reassure the electorate it was opening up.

Consultative initiatives like the Feedback Unit were publicised, while out-of-bounds markers were never spelt out except in response to specific situations, she added.

And criticism of non-political issues was tolerated, but not criticism of the Government's competence and integrity, she said.

One participant, however, questioned that view, asking if Singaporeans were 'depending too much on the Government changing and not on changing ourselves?'

Dr Balakrishnan told participants that there would always be a place for 'so-called political dissidents'. But he challenged them to ask themselves if they were prepared to do more and create tangible results.

He also said the Government was sincere in wanting to engage Singaporeans - but reminded that it would always do what was best in the country's interest.