

‘Who says Singapore is not politically mature?’: Janil Puthucheary

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SINGAPORE - Young people in Singapore are interested and engaged in politics, and Singapore undersells itself if it thinks it is not politically mature, said Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, and Health.

He observed that young people ask questions, turn up at grassroots events and even send him messages to offer their views. There are also platforms like Forward Singapore sessions that engage young people.

“Well, who says we are not politically mature?” he said, responding to a question on how Singapore can develop into a politically mature and conscious society. “So what is the political maturity you are looking for?”

He was speaking to a 1,200-strong audience – many of them young people – at the closing of the Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre on Jan 29. Online sessions were held earlier on Jan 22.

“We listen to you because we do need to understand what are the issues that young people are concerned about... what would they do as they participate in the building of Singapore in the future,” he added in reply to a question about empowering young people to engage with politics.

The theme of this year’s conference was “Youth”, focusing on how today’s young are coming of age amid unprecedented change on many fronts – socio-economic, technological, demographic, and even the “nuclear family”.

While Singapore should never consider itself as having arrived, it should not start from the basis that it is not a politically mature society, Dr Janil said, adding that Singapore should not rate itself worse than other societies out there.

His comments followed a pre-conference survey by IPS, which showed that younger respondents tend to be more civically engaged compared with their older counterparts. This younger group participates in such activities both online and offline, and feels more empowered to create change.

The poll was conducted with 2,356 Singapore residents between November and December 2023. The respondents were divided in three age groups: 21 to 34, 35 to 49, and 50 to 64.

In the dialogue moderated by IPS senior research fellow Kalpana Vignehsa, who conducted the poll, Dr Janil said one of the issues that keep him awake at night is the possibility of polarisation in Singapore society. This can be brought about by a number of structural incentives such as advertising money and audience drive on social media, he said.

“We are still a society where regardless of whatever party we voted for... we still find common ground,” he said. “But there are societies in this world where the opposite has happened, and where political affiliation has come along with ideological polarisation.”

He added that while Singapore has political contestation, there should not be ideological and social polarisation.

Asked about his role as the People’s Action Party’s party Whip, he said parties have positions they take and values they espouse.

His role is to bring together diverse issues and provide a platform to settle that divergence, so that they can drive the agenda forward and build a sense of cohesion.

Dr Janil was also asked about meritocracy and how it may propagate intergenerational inequality, where families of high socio-economic standing can fund the development of their children. In response, he said it is unworkable to absolutely ensure that there is no difference between every child.

What is being done is to have programmes that help those who do not have the benefit of intergenerational transfers, such as in pre-schools and early childhood education, where the skills and expertise of educators and social workers are applied to those who do not have any advantage.

“Meritocracy is something that needs to be nurtured and grown, tended to carefully, (and) adjustments made along the way,” he said.