

PM tackles questions on S'pore system, freedom of speech at IPS conference

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SINGAPORE — A dialogue themed on what lies ahead for Singapore played out yesterday (July 2) with discussion on two court cases against bloggers now.

Amid the questions being posed — from Singapore's relationship with China vis-a-vis the Republic's ties with the United States, race and religion, the threat of terrorism, and the role of ASEAN — what cropped up several times were Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's court appearance on Wednesday in a hearing to assess the damages in a defamation suit against blogger Roy Ngerng, as well as the criminal case against teenage blogger Amos Yee.

Mr Lee was taking questions from CNN host and The Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria at a one-hour session. The session was part of the "Singapore at 50: What Lies Ahead?" conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and which continues today.

The reference to Amos first came when Mr Lee spoke about freedom of speech. Although the freedom exists in Singapore, restraints are necessary in instances such as when faiths are derided or proselytising is involved. And in some cases, taking a person to court is needed, "as happened with this young man Amos Yee recently", said Mr Lee.

"There has to be a lot of give and take because you need strict rules. But at the same time, this is an area where if you insist on going by the rules, everybody is going to be a loser. It is not possible for us to codify in a set of statutes exactly what is permissible (and) what is not permissible conduct," he added.

Mr Lee said that with social media, "it becomes a harder problem because the restraints are less, the possibility of giving offence and the ease of taking umbrage is so much greater".

He added: "Overnight you wake up, you can find that somebody has been unwise and everybody has become upset, and we have to run around putting out fires. It has happened more than once and I'm sure it will happen again."

On the dominance of countries such as the US, Sweden and Israel in innovation, science and technology, Dr Zakaria said these communities are common in that there is a culture of a lack of respect for or challenging authority.

"You spent six hours yesterday in a court trying to do this, to instil a culture of respect. And isn't it exactly the opposite of what you need for your economic future?" the US journalist asked.

In response, Mr Lee said: "You want people to stand up, not scrape and bow. But if you don't have a certain natural aristocracy in the system, people who are respected because they have earned that and we level everything down to the lowest common denominator, then I think society will lose out ... If you end up with anarchy, it doesn't mean that you'll be delivered with brilliance."

Dr Zakaria parried, questioning whether the Government is overly paranoid about anarchy. He added that he feels Mr Lee should have ignored Ngerng, saying: "Look at what people call Barack Obama on the Internet. It would have made your blood curdle."

When questions were open to the floor, the focus was again moved back on Ngerng's and Amos' cases by medical professor Paul Tambyah, who is a volunteer with the opposition Singapore Democratic Party. With the Government's focus seemingly "shifted to minor players, such as a rude and insensitive teenager ... (and) the son of a chai tow kway seller who wrote 400 blog articles", will there be more space for diverse views in the future, asked Dr Tambyah.

Mr Lee replied that one can discuss anything, but "you can't defame anybody you like". He added: "If you can't redress defamation, how can I clear my name when somebody defames me?"

THE SINGAPORE SYSTEM

Mr Lee also made the point that Singapore should seek to maintain a system where the interests of the majority of the people are to support a good government, which will develop policies that help most Singaporeans.

Responding to Dr Zakaria on why Singapore has not transitioned like several other advanced countries politically, Mr Lee said: "In most other countries, the governments do not develop policies which are meant to help everybody equally. If you're Republicans, it's quite clear whom your policies are meant to help. Mitt Romney said 'Well it's 55 per cent, and the other 45 should take care of themselves'. If you're a democrat, you also know what your constituency is and you take care of that constituency. If you're the senator of Montana, you know you're supposed to bring the bacon back to Montana.

He added: "But in Singapore, the Government's job is to look after as large a proportion of the population as possible, while still giving people incentive to vote for this Government so that they will get some benefit from it. And if we take the view that if you voted against me, I shall help you first, because that shows my largeness of spirit, then I think we will go extinct as a Government."

At the conference, Mr Lee reiterated there has been strong conviction to build the country. Good leadership and regional stability also contributed to Singapore's progress. The challenge would be to maintain this progress for the future, he said. "We worry all the time. People say we're paranoid, which I suppose we are and we need to be because at a higher level, you expect to be at a higher level, you don't expect to go back to where you were in the 1960s and yet it's not natural that you stay at this place.

"Is it to be expected that a population of three-and-a-half million citizens and maybe a million foreign workers will have the best airline in the world? The best airport in the world? One of the busiest ports in the world? A financial centre, which is one of three or four key financial centres in the world and an education and healthcare and housing system which gives us a per capita GDP, which is - at least by World Bank calculations if you look at PPP (purchasing power parity) - higher than America, Australia or Japan.

"It's an entirely unnatural state of affairs and one which we should count our blessings for, if not every day, at least every election."

Mr Lee was also asked how the country can accommodate younger Singaporeans who have grown up with an open media culture, are more autonomous and have a stronger sense of identity, and live in an age of peace and prosperity.

"I think the politics will change. It's a new generation. They have different aspirations, different interests. You look at the causes which they have adopted - some are religious, some are green causes, some are social causes, all sorts of things.

"So they have passions, they are pursuing them and we have to find, they have to find leaders who will be able to marshal enough of them to form a core to lead the country, and a majority of them to support the system which will work." WITH CHANNEL NEWSASIA