

PM on why Singapore needs to keep on being exceptional

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At the opening of the SG50+ conference on Thursday, organised by the **Institute of Policy Studies**, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took questions on a wide range of topics during a one-hour dialogue moderated by CNN host and The Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria. These are some excerpts:

Dr Zakaria: How do you maintain the pressure and the sense of drive (among Singaporeans)? I'm asking a question in a sense that every rich parent wonders about with his children.

Mr Lee: Every child thinks his father is rich and that is a problem for us. It's a real challenge. The threats have changed, but, in fact, threats have not disappeared. You may not think of them as existential threats in a sense that an army will come and invade you and take over you, but can your cheese disappear? Yes. Can your lunch disappear? Yes. Can your business go somewhere very rapidly? It's entirely possible and something that we worry about all the time. We are the second-busiest port in the world; Shanghai is the busiest. They came from nowhere. Why are we the second-busiest port? Not because we generate the business, but because we are efficient and transshipment cargoes come to Singapore from very far away. They used to come from Chennai in India to Singapore to be transhipped in order to go to Europe; it makes no sense. Few hundred, few thousand miles to the east and back again, but we can provide a service which obviously, nobody else more conveniently-placed can. Why can we do that? Because we are performing exceptionally and we need to keep on being able to do that, otherwise, somebody would move our cheese.

Dr Zakaria: Why is it that Singapore has been able to achieve this extraordinary circumstance where it has not on several key political dimensions, transitioned the way that Taiwan has, South Korea has...

Mr Lee: ... if you look at the countries that you have cited ... (the) Taiwanese, after 50 years are not in a completely satisfactory situation either. Korea after many years of semi-military rule, now has elections, but a lot uncertainties in their government. I've written congratulatory and valedictory letters to many Korean Prime Ministers. I have just signed another one.

So, I mean do we want to be there? I don't think we want to be there. Why have we avoided doing that? I think firstly, because we have been small and it's quite a homogeneous society ... I have a multi-racial mix, but I have a mix where everybody has benefited from the system and everybody has a stake and can see that it is working ... It has prevailed so far. Will it prevail for another 50 years? I cannot say. I think it's not easy, we don't know how the world will change, we don't know how Singapore society will change. But I think that, for as long as we can, we should try and maintain a system where the interests of the majority of the population is to support a good government ... which will develop policies, which will help most Singaporeans. In most other countries, the governments do not develop policies that are meant to help everybody equally ... But in Singapore, the Government's job is to look after as large a proportion of the population as possible, while still giving people the incentive to vote for this Government, so they will get some

benefit from it. 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 would go extinct as a government.

Dr Zakaria: Do you think that the problem of racial harmony is largely solved?

Mr Lee: No, it's still there. We are more of one country now. And our sense of being Singaporeans together is stronger. If you see somebody overseas, whether he's Indian or Malay or Chinese or Eurasian, you look at him carefully, you can tell that he is Singaporean, something about him ... But the problem is not gone because one of the ways the world has changed in the past 50 years is that religion has become more prominent; Islam, Christianity even the Buddhists are more prominent in the world and more prominent in Singapore. Everybody is more conscious of their identity. Church attendance in Singapore is at record levels ... The Muslims take their religion very seriously in Singapore, I think much more so than a quarter century or half a century ago. So these are lines that are very clearly drawn and unless you make a very strong effort to overlap them, to work across them, to integrate despite them, they can always render you asunder. And if I have one day an ISIS attack in Singapore, I will have a very big problem. Not just because a few people may be killed, but because of the suspicions and the enmities and the unspoken fears that will be created instantly, and which will show in people's conduct, in their interactions with one another, in the way fear generates fear and people separate out and you are not quite one society again.