

## Can the PAP catch its own tigers?

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Can the PAP continue to bring down corrupted senior officials, who are called “tigers” by Chinese President Xi Jinping in China’s anti-corruption campaign? If Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) can check itself, what about the Workers’ Party (WP), the leading opposition party in Parliament?

A government that has its own set of checks and balances is one that is accountable and functions well, which is why the Singapore Government’s ability to “ownself check ownself” is a virtue, Singapore Health Minister Mr Ong said on Jan 13, as reported in various Singapore media including Today.

“People can say ‘ownself check ownself’, but I see it always as a virtue — if ownself cannot check ownself, you’re in big trouble,” Ong Ye Kung said at a forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Mr Ong also said a party that can discipline itself will govern the nation well. Multiple examples show a party can do this effectively only if it is severe with its members, otherwise external independent agents are needed.

Last year, WP leader Pritam Singh and some other senior WP members investigated former WP Member of Parliament (MP) Raeesah Khan for lying in Parliament, as she had confessed.

Last December, the Parliament’s Committee of Privileges questioned Khan, Singh and other senior WP members including Sylvia Lim about Khan’s lies. Most of the members of this committee are PAP members, except the WP’s Dennis Tan as the sole opposition member.

Although the committee has not yet announced its findings, it grilled Singh and Lim for many hours on how they conducted their investigation of Khan. This indicates the committee questioned the WP’s ability to effectively check its wayward members like Khan.

If the committee finds Singh guilty of impropriety over his investigation of Khan, it will conclusively prove that a political party, in this case, the WP, is not always a good check on itself and external investigators are sometimes needed.

Mr Ong’s words echoed an earlier statement by former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. On Aug 27, 2015, Today quoted Goh saying, “We are our own checks.”

Perhaps an example of “ownself check ownself” is related to Goh’s son Jin Hian. The younger Goh assisted an investigation by the Commercial Affairs Department (CAD), disclosed on Sept 30, 2020, by New Silkroutes Group, a Singapore-listed company where Goh junior was formerly non-executive chairman. This shows in Singapore, not even a former Prime Minister’s son is above assisting an investigation. Goh junior is presumed innocent unless proven guilty of any offence.

A Prime Minister is also not always the best check on himself, as shown in British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Sue Gray, a British civil servant, is investigating parties thrown by the Prime Minister’s Office in Downing Street, at least one of which was attended by Johnson. The parties allegedly violated the COVID-19 measures which Johnson’s government imposed on the rest of his country. The general consensus is Johnson will soon step down as British Prime Minister.

So widespread is the popular outrage against Johnson that current polls indicate his Conservative Party will be soundly defeated in the next general election. Hence, some members of his own party have called for his resignation. If Johnson remained as Prime Minister through the next general election, many Conservative MPs are likely to lose their seats. So it is in the Conservative party’s interest to replace its leader.

Singapore inherited the Westminster Parliamentary system from its former British colonial rulers. This means that theoretically if a Singapore Prime Minister hypothetically becomes seriously unpopular, his own party would view him as a liability and probably oust him. It can be argued this is an example of a party checking itself, as mentioned by Ong and Goh Chok Tong.

But the UK also has checks and balances, including the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, who has called on Johnson to resign, as well as a free press that has been aggressively chasing the “Partygate” scandal of the parties in Downing Street.

Ong said he does not believe that a full-fledged two-party system can arise in Singapore, Today reported on Jan 13.

Since Britain ruled Hong Kong till now when the city is part of China, Hong Kong never had full democracy like Singapore and the UK. However, Hong Kong has a press that is fairly free despite the National Security Law and the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

It was the ICAC’s investigation of a former Hong Kong chief executive, Donald Tsang, which resulted in Tsang being sentenced to jail for misconduct in public office on Feb 22, 2017. Tsang was released from prison on Jan 15, 2019. The imprisonment of this

former Hong Kong chief executive shows the Independent Commission Against Corruption deserves the word “Independent” in its name.

Just as the ICAC helped make Hong Kong one of the least corrupt jurisdictions in the world, the late Lee Kuan Yew’s strict stance against corruption made Singapore one of the cleanest countries. Lee’s tenure as Singapore Prime Minister saw the downfall of two ministers. In 1975, Wee Toon Boon, a minister of the ruling PAP, was jailed for corruption. Another PAP minister, Teh Cheang Wan, committed suicide in December 1986 while under investigation for corruption.

So, as questioned earlier, can the PAP continue to bring down corrupted senior officials, who are called “tigers” by Chinese President Xi Jinping in China’s anti-corruption campaign? Since Xi launched the campaign in late 2012, over 100 tigers have been taken down. This includes Zhou Yongkang, who was formerly China’s most senior police official and was sentenced to life in prison in 2015.

If only China’s police department, the Ministry of Public Security, investigated itself, Zhou would be unlikely to be punished because when he was Public Security Minister, he would have blocked investigations against himself. Zhou was instead investigated by China’s anti-graft agency, the Central Committee for Discipline Inspection.

Although China is a one-party state, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) checks itself by having different government departments check each other. If the PAP is to effectively check itself, it must be as ruthless as the CCP in catching its own tigers.

Beyond having different government departments check each other, the CCP fosters internal competition. This is explained by Xu Chenggang, a former professor at Hong Kong University. According to Xu, Chinese officials are assessed by their superiors on how well they performed in administering the cities or provinces under their control.

The Chinese officials who performed best would be promoted. In this way, Chinese officials competed against each other in an internal tournament. This was one of the reasons China prospered, and the CCP did so well in governing China even though China is not a democracy, explained Xu when I attended his lectures while studying for a Master’s of Economics at Hong Kong University.

Going forward, if the PAP is to govern Singapore, as well as the late Lee Kuan Yew did, the party must promote vigorous internal competition to select Singapore’s next prime minister. Ong Ye Kung, Lawrence Wong, Chan Chun Sing and Tharman Shanmugaratnam should vigorously compete with each other to determine the best leader of the PAP and Singapore.