

Law Minister K Shanmugam clarifies role of President: Voice of people but...

Lediati Tan

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THE President can be the voice of the people, but there are things that he cannot say.

Yesterday, Law Minister K Shanmugam made it clear at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum that everything the President does in public, including what he says, can only be on the advice of the Cabinet.

And if he chooses to go against the Government, he can be booted out of office.

Said Mr Shanmugam: "If the Head of State challenges the Government, he will be acting unconstitutionally. In the UK, the last time that was done was in 1642 by Charles I. The King lost both his life and his throne for his trouble..."

"Nowadays of course, we deal with these issues through the courts."

Ms Thio Li-ann, a National University of Singapore law professor, and Professor Tommy Koh, special adviser to IPS, also spoke on the roles, responsibilities and powers of the Elected President (EP).

Over recent weeks, several presidential hopefuls have said that they want to be the voice of the people and act as a conduit to address the concerns of the people directly with the Government.

Some said they would do it privately while others said they would do so publicly.

Mr Shanmugam explained that the president cannot publicly debate with the Government because the president symbolises and represents the entire country.

As such, he has to be above the fray while the power to legislate must be with the Parliament.

Said the Minister: "This is also to protect the Presidency because if he speaks only on the advice of Cabinet, then his office is not burdened by responsibility, the outcome of specific policies."

The President also cannot choose to act on his own in any public aspect.

The only exception is when executing the powers specifically vested in the office of the president to do so.

The President cannot reject any advice given by the Cabinet. He also has to be impartial and must be seen to be impartial in political debates.

But this does not mean that the president cannot be highly influential.

The president receives all Cabinet papers and meets with the Prime Minister regularly to discuss a wide range of issues, including issues of the day.