

## **Ho Kwon Ping: PAP would eventually lose its dominance**

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**The Online Citizen**, 21 October 2014

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings and an S R Nathan fellow, gave his first lecture, "Politics and governance" of the series of five organised by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) at the University Cultural Centre at NUS on Monday.

### ***The three elephants in the room for the next fifty years of Singapore***

Mr Ho said that national sovereignty can never be assumed and that the environment can turn hostile for the next fifty years. Having a consecutive streak of uninterrupted economic and national sovereignty does not guarantee that future generations will have the same good fortune.

It is during times of prolonged peace that national identity needs to be forged as history has shown that countries fall due to internal decay. The internal cohesion will be more important and more difficult to achieve in the next fifty years.

While observers might say that Singapore's best days have already passed as the city state reaches the 50-year mark, Mr Ho disagreed that Singapore has peaked in its development. He felt that this is a watershed moment for Singapore as foundations of economic growth and political stability have made it possible for the younger generation to pursue their full potential beyond just economic growth.

*"Today's young generation can and will define and the set out to achieve their own definition of what a developed society means, in terms of social justice, egalitarian culture, political maturity, cultural creativity and all the other markers of the truly exceptional country that we can be. So far from having peaked, the best is yet to be."*

Mr Ho pointed out that it is in the domestic social, cultural and political realm that the change will be most evident in the next fifty years.

He said, "It will not be a tension free evolution and we will see more heated "culture wars", and the government will hopefully not intervene in a heavy-handed and patriarchal manner but instead allow players from a wide spectrum of civil society to engage and find some mutually-acceptable resolution between themselves."

He added that the journey of social and cultural maturity will define the next two decades.

### ***PAP could lose dominance within 15 years***

The last elephant in the room is the concern over the dominance of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore for the next fifty years. "Can the dominance be maintained, if not how? What are the possible changes and ramifications?"

PAP could see itself losing its dominance in Parliament in 15 years, or lose power completely in the second half of the next 50 years, said Mr Ho.

He pointed out that it is a daunting task for PAP to renew itself, working against the historical trend of how democratically elected parties will fall out of power generally within half a century to three-quarters of a century as they floundered. The parties become corrupt, riveted with internal strife and prompt a previously loyal electorate to vote them out.

“Ironically, however, an electoral loss often enables drastic internal reforms to occur and new reformers to gain control of the party,” he added. “This new leadership, coupled with disillusionment with the opposition-turned-governing-party, brings the founding party back to power, and a dynamic equilibrium, comprising a multi-party pendulum, becomes the norm. The present ruling parties in Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Mexico, are all versions of this same story.”

Mr Ho proposed three possible scenarios which PAP will be in the next 50 years – the status quo scenario where PAP maintains 75% to 85% of Parliamentary seats (regardless of the popular vote); the dominant party scenario where the PAP retains control of Parliament with a two-third majority of the seats; and the two-party pendulum scenario where a single or coalition party wins the election and the power shifts between the two key entities.

As to how PAP would eventually lose power, Mr Ho gave three possible causes – an accidental or “freak” election; a split within the PAP; or a massive loss in legitimacy among the voters.

A false sense of security might be given to PAP and its supporters by the overwhelming seats held by the PAP despite only garnering 60% of the popular vote.

If sufficient voters want to have more opposition parliamentarians than the current 10%, or are unhappy about certain policies but not necessarily want to change the government, it could result in a small swing vote of about 8% to 10% in the election results. Although the PAP might retain a majority percentage of 52% to 48% in popular votes, it might also see big GRCs being lost to opposition parties, resulting in an unexpected outcome of the opposition taking over power.

Mr Ho predict that a split in the party is not likely to happen within the ruling party, unless there are extreme differences, in which self-serving opposing factions would consider the option.

“Nevertheless, the last elections have shown that retired PAP MPs do not necessarily toe the party line, and with each passing election, challenges to current leadership by current or past MPs and ministers may well grow, without the overwhelming authority of Lee Kuan Yew to squash dissenting voices.”

If the PAP were to sustain an outright defeat in the elections, as in the recent case of India’s general elections, it will face a a long, irrecoverable and massive loss of legitimacy.

Mr Ho spoke about the high trust that the PAP command over Singaporeans. “Its exceptionalism on corruptibility has allowed the PAP to get away with governance styles, the paternalism of the so-called nanny state which might be resented by many Singaporeans but grudgingly accepted, because of well-spread trust; such that whether the policy mishap, the political leadership is generally acting in the best interest of the public and never for their own personal financial gain.”

But Mr Ho questioned whether that same exceptionalism that PAP possess can be maintained two or three decades from the present.