

Janil Puthucheary and Cherian George spar over claim that Government selectively lets society 'decide' on divisive issues

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TODAY, 26 October 2018

SINGAPORE — After giving speeches separately on managing diversity in the socio-political space, Dr Janil Puthucheary and academic Cherian George were caught up in a charged debate later over their divergent views on the topic of government intervention.

The moderator of the dialogue then had to step in to “manage” the exchange as they wrestled on the question of whether the Singapore Government selectively allows society to take the lead when it comes to certain divisive issues, such as the law that criminalises sex between men.

On Friday (Oct 26), Dr Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, and Prof George, a former journalist now teaching media studies at the Hong Kong Baptist University, were at a panel discussion on the politics of diversity management, held as part of a conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

A member of the audience commented that it is difficult to discuss lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues since there are certain prohibitions in promoting homosexuality content.

Responding to this, Dr Puthucheary acknowledged the need to have constructive dialogue without people from both ends of the spectrums vilifying and “demonising” each other, but he does not feel that Singapore’s society has arrived at that stage.

That is because of the polarising nature of the topic, he said, and the broad middle ground is “not ready to engage”, so this will take “more time and effort”.

Giving his opinion, Prof George said that there is a “certain selectivity” in the Government’s approach when it comes to reading ground sentiments and its decisions on whether to “follow the ground or to lead the ground”.

He noted that, for instance, the Government run by the ruling People’s Action Party had played a leading role when it came to nation building. It did not have to consult the majority when it decided to separate from Malaysia or develop the country’s economy.

“It led from the front, often using a great amount of force and coercion to lead the way,” Prof George said. Yet, when it comes to certain “progressive” issues, the Government “has been behind or in the middle”.

He said that this does not mean the Government is being neutral. Rather, the decision to adopt that approach is based on ideological, practical and political choices.

While the Government said that it is merely playing a role akin to a “referee”, Prof George sees it as a “biased referee”.

He went on to say that it is an “open secret” that activists for certain progressive issues are not just obstructed from promoting their cases, but are “blacklisted”, which affects their employment prospects, among others. That does not happen to activists on the other end of the spectrum, he added.

“That does not sound to me like a neutral referee. That sounds to me like a referee that decided it wants conservatives to win.”

A less coercive approach?

Dr Puthuchery argued that letting society decide on such issues is not ideological, but a pragmatic decision, such that the outcome would be what society can accept.

It also means that the Government is aspiring to be “less coercive”, so that people “feel a sense of engagement and empowerment” in shaping social issues and the progress of the society, he said.

This has to be seen as a positive development after 53 years, he added.

These points then triggered a testy exchange between both men, with Prof George asking: “Are we less coercive on certain issues?”

Dr Puthuchery retorted: “Do you want us to be less coercive or more coercive? I can’t decide what you want.”

Prof George said that the Government should be “less coercive in dealing with activists on the progressive side”, and this includes censoring them less.

If the Government “sincerely believes” that it has to let society evolve, it should not obstruct activists trying to “persuade their fellow citizens”.

“It is the selectivity of coercion, selectivity of liberalisation that is the worry. If that is the Government’s position, come out and say it,” Prof George asserted.

After the moderator — Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy's vice-dean Suzaina Kadir — stepped in, Dr Puthuchery quipped: “If I keep going, we’ll never end.”

Earlier in their separate speeches, Dr Puthuchery said that there are two extreme approaches when it comes to managing diversity: One where the state plays a heavy-handed role, while the other is to be “laidback”.

For Singapore, he said that “we lie somewhere in the middle”. However, he stressed that there is a need to move away from a zero-sum approach, where issues are framed such that there will be winners and losers.

Prof George, on the other hand, called for government leaders to review its approach when discussing divisive issues such as race and religion, and not to frame them as a “security concern or risk”.

Expressing hope that the fourth-generation leaders are not an “old operating system in a shiny new body”, he said in his speech that they should be confident in themselves and their policies.