

Singapore has yet to fulfill Pledge to build a democratic society: Cherian George

Vernon Lee

Yahoo News Singapore, 27 October 2018

The aspiration to build a democratic society in Singapore may have been enshrined in the Pledge but the meaning has been “hollowed out” over the decades since the country’s first-generation leaders wrote it, said Hong Kong Baptist University media professor Cherian George.

This was due to Singapore’s minimal model of democratic government primarily by way of an electoral mandate, which has led to a failure to harness fully the nation-building potential of democracy, according to Prof George.

“The PAP’s (People’s Action Party) preferred model of democracy is one where citizens stay out of the kitchen and entrust the job to professional cooks,” said Prof George. He was speaking on Friday (26 October) at a conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the Institute of Policy Studies held at the Marina Bay Sands.

Giving his views during a panel discussion on the politics of diversity management, Prof George highlighted that the Pledge doesn’t just commit the citizens of Singapore to protect and preserve democratic structures. Through an ongoing process, citizens should also participate and build a democratic society, he added.

Prof George, who formerly lectured at the Nanyang Technological University, compared the Singapore government to a dominant monopoly that is also its own regulator, whose unchallenged position is impervious to the marketplace of ideas.

“This model has already compromised the quality of decision making and led to an unnecessary, avoidable depletion of the political capital the government needs to serve its nation-building role, and is at odds with the clarion call contained in our Pledge, that we the citizens of Singapore are fellow nation-builders.”

The government as a referee

One of the positive aspects and traditional strengths of the PAP has been its reputation as a generally neutral referee among competing groups, Prof George said. Its character as a national movement has been key in managing differences within Singapore.

“Because in intra-societal disputes, people generally felt that they could trust this referee, even if not everyone liked it. To the extent that the PAP was dictatorial, at least it was an equal-opportunity dictator,” he added.

But this “traditional” strength is no longer true today, he pointed out. For instance, the PAP’s mismanagement of immigration has tarnished its reputation as the protector of Singaporeans’ interests. Consequently, the government had to moderate its immigration policies in the wake of discontent over the issue during the 2011 general election, he said.

During the question and answer session, Prof George again brought up the reference of the PAP being a referee in relation to the government's management of issues across what he called "the conservative-progressive spectrum".

Activists for certain progressive causes are not just obstructed but also blacklisted, which can affect their employment prospects, Prof George argued. On certain issues, the government has made an ideological choice of playing the role of a "biased referee" with a "clear bias" for conservative groups against activists promoting progressive causes, he said.

Heated exchange during discussion

Dr Janil Puthuchery, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, who was also a speaker at the discussion, disagreed with Prof George, saying that many of the issues highlighted by the academic involved making pragmatic political choices about what can be done such that society can accept them.

"We need to be less coercive because people feel a sense of engagement and empowerment around social issues and around the progress of our society. It has to be seen as a positive development after 53 years (of nationhood), Dr Puthuchery said.

The comments were followed by a robust exchange between the speakers. Prof George asked, "But are we less coercive on certain issues?", prompting Dr Puthuchery to rebut, "Do you want us to be less coercive or more coercive? I can't decide what you want."

In response, Prof George urged the government not to stand in the way of activists promoting causes such as the abolition of the death penalty and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, and to censor them less.

"If indeed you sincerely believe that you have to let society evolve and the government to watch carefully, watch the evolution and move in step with society. If you sincerely believe that, then let society evolve. Don't obstruct activists that are trying to persuade their fellow citizens of certain points of views," Prof George said.

"They are obstructed and penalised, there are personal repercussions for them. And I am quite sure that similar repercussions do not befall on the activists that are on the other side of the spectrum. So it is a selectivity of coercion, it is the selectivity of liberalisation that is worrying. If indeed that is the government's position and platform, then come out and say it," he added.

Promoting diversity of ideas

Rounding up the discussion, Dr Puthuchery said he didn't think progressive ideas are being obstructed and that there is a diversity of political opinions in Singapore.

"Our diversity is a strength but it needs to be managed on the assumption that it is, must be and will be a strength for us as a nation. That does require the sense of trust and the ability to come together with a common sense of aspiration."

Earlier in his opening remarks, Prof George referred to the upcoming handover of government to the fourth-generation leaders and expressed a wish for them to be "so confident in themselves" such that they can lower the protectionist barriers around the marketplace of ideas.

He said, "Equally overdue is a leadership able to model an enthusiasm for multiculturalism deeper than the superficiality of colourful costumes and spicy cuisine, not just to appeal to tourists but more importantly to get Singaporeans to see diversity mainly as a source of vitality and not always a vulnerability."