

Singapore's political system must be refreshed: Tony Tan

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Singapore's President Tony Tan has hinted at political changes to come, in his opening address to the 13th Parliament, which set out the government's agenda for its five-year term.

Addressing the 91 newly-sworn in Members of Parliament and Non-Constituency Members of Parliament on Friday (15 Jan), Tan said that political innovations such as the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), which guarantee at least a minimum representation of minorities in Parliament, have worked well.

But he acknowledged that while the political system has delivered stability and progress for Singapore, it needs to be refreshed from time to time, as circumstances change.

"The Government will study this matter carefully, to see whether and how we should improve our political system so that we can be assured of clean, effective, and accountable government over the long term," said Tan.

In light of Thursday's (14 Jan) terror attacks in Jakarta, in which at least seven people were killed, the President's speech also addressed the security of Singapore. Tan said the incident was a reminder of "how close terrorism can strike". He added, "We are fully on guard against this threat, but we cannot rule out the possibility of an attack in Singapore."

Tan emphasized that terrorism has become a "dangerous and persistent threat". Hundreds of terrorists from Southeast Asia are fighting for ISIS in Syria and Iraq, said Tan, and some of them have returned home with their "networks, expertise and radical ideology".

The President also struck a sober note on Singapore's economy, noting that it was at a turning point. He said, "Our first 50 years saw us advance rapidly from Third World to First. But now that our economy is more mature, we will grow more slowly."

Tan added, "Upgrading will entail restructuring. There will be winners and losers among companies, with some painful dislocation, but economic progress will ultimately benefit all Singaporeans."

The President noted other challenges to the country, such as the rapidly aging population and "more severe global competition".

But he added that the government is building for a better future, pointing to long-term investments and projects, such as the ongoing construction of Changi Airport's T4 and T5 and new developments like Bidadari and the Southern Waterfront.

In response to queries from Yahoo Singapore, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Gillian Koh felt that Tan's comments about possible changes to the political system was the "most striking" aspect of his speech.

"As we can expect a presidential election on August 2017 and also given that there has been some debate on the system itself, it is an intriguing statement which leads us to wonder if there is a review of this young institution," said Koh.

She added that the 13th Parliament has to deal with “unfinished business” from its predecessor - namely, the clarification and strengthening of the Town Council Act. Due to the controversies arising from the Workers’ Party-held wards, the 12th Parliament had discussed the limitations of the Act and the need to review it, said Koh.

“This will be important as the WP is back at Aljunied-Hougang and it will not be productive to end up with the same problems and controversies in the 13th Parliament,” said Koh.