

THE SUPPER CLUB | KISHORE MAHBUBANI

# 'Make OB markers on race and religion narrower'

He's been called one of the world's top thinkers. A former United Nations (UN) Security Council president and now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, governance expert Kishore Mahbubani, 66, shares his thoughts with **Tham Yuen-C** on the new political environment in Singapore and what is in store for the country, ahead of the SG50+ Conference next month, where he will chair one of the sessions.



ST PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KEMBURAJU THANGARAJAN & MANNY FRANCISCO

■ A development many say will affect governance is the proliferation of social media. There's been a lot of talk about the downside for governments. Is there any upside?

I think that here, it's a mistake to pass moral judgment on whether the Internet and social media is good or bad. It doesn't matter.

When you educate the people, you create a new political reality. When you create a middle-class population, you create a new political reality. You cannot turn back the clock and say: I want to go back to the era when all I needed to do in the 1960s was to go to a slum in Toa Payoh, put in a standing water pipe and the people would be so grateful that they would vote for the government.

Those days are gone. In the same way, you cannot turn the clock back on social media and the Internet. It is a reality, you have to deal with it.

Which is why I am glad that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is very active on Facebook, and you have to be.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a traditional Indian gentleman. He doesn't wear Western suits. Yet he's very astute in his understanding of social media. I was told when he goes to an election rally and gives a speech, there are rallies in many other places where they see a hologram of him speaking. So here is this guy, looks like a traditional Indian gentleman – (yet) can exploit holograms, can exploit social media, can exploit Facebook and tweets.

■ Government actions such as imposing licensing requirements on certain websites are sometimes seen as clamping down on the Internet. Some even cite the closure of socio-political site *The Real Singapore* (TRS), which was accused of fanning nationalist and racist tensions. Is this a case of trying to turn back the clock?

I support the shutting down of TRS, because I am a member of a minority within a minority (Professor Mahbubani is Sindhi). So any kind of force that creates ethnic tensions and endangers minorities like me should be shut down. It may not necessarily have all the effect you need but it's a symbolic thing that needs to be done and I'm very glad that they did it.

In Singapore, on some things, we need to widen out-of-bounds (OB) markers. But on issues involving race and religion, I would say, make the OB markers narrower. I actually believe that, because we're too small to afford the kind of ethnic strife that other countries have suffered.

■ What about in other cases, such as requiring certain websites to register with the Media Development Authority or apply for individual licences?

When the flood is coming and there's a hole in the dyke, and you put your finger in, it won't stop the flood. And social media is a flood. No government can control

it any more.

So, while it's important to make symbolic gestures, like shutting down TRS, at the same time, you have to acknowledge the reality that you cannot shut off social media.

■ You've written about a growing cynicism being spread online. So what can be done about this if you can't control the Internet?

I've also written that I'm a student of philosophy and, as such, I believe in the voice of reason. When I was ambassador to the UN, I said that the only weapons that representatives of small states have are: reason, logic and charm. And I found that they were remarkably powerful weapons that could actually persuade big states to listen to small states. And these can be used in Singapore, too.

■ Next month, you will lead a discussion about new democratic challenges at the SG50+ Conference. How do you think governance will evolve in

Singapore in the next 50 years?

There's absolutely no doubt that you're going to have greater pluralism. It's happening already.

Singapore has now one of the most well-educated populations in the world, and when you have that, you're bound to get more questions from the population. It's inevitable.

■ How should the Government react to this new political environment?

To be fair, they understand that the nature of the ground is changing. Hence they are changing and adapting a great deal. Many members of the Government spend much more time in weekly engagements with the people at their meet-the-people sessions.

The fact that the Prime Minister actually apologised in the middle of the last election campaign (for not getting it right with some government initiatives) was quite a stunning moment in Singapore's political history. It showed that he had captured the feedback and understood that the environment

had changed and he wanted to explain to the people what we had done right and what we had done wrong.

I would say the Government is very good at listening. They have very good feedback loops and they do pick up a tremendous amount of information.

■ Is there a risk of this responsiveness turning into populism? You've warned of the dangers of Singapore falling to a populist government in your writings.

It would be very unfair to call the present Government populist. For a start, we have budget surpluses, and populist governments have budget deficits.

The danger that I warned in my book (*Can Singapore Survive?*) is that a populist party will come along and say: "Hey, we have this tremendous number of reserves – over US\$200 billion (S\$270 billion) – this is your money. If you elect me, I will give each Singapore citizen household \$10,000 a year."

The biggest challenge that most democracies in the world face is that the politicians who run for office promise you all kinds of goodies but they transfer the bill to future generations. They have major budget deficits and they pass the bill to future generations to pay. You notice that our present Government doesn't do that.

In fact, the Singapore Government is truly unique. Most democratic governments hand out goodies and tax future generations. Singapore is the only country that pays upfront for future goodies. Here, I must confess I'm a beneficiary of the Pioneer Generation Package.

Now, that's a degree of fiscal responsibility that, to the best of my knowledge, no other democratic government has.

■ But with more and more pressure from citizens and opposition parties, is there a danger the current government may turn populist?

I hope not, and this is where culture and values matter a lot. The sense I have about Singapore is that most people are aware of the limitations of Singapore, and they know you can't afford to do the sort of things that many democratic governments have done in other parts of the world. So I hope that, over time, the Singapore population will become even more sensible and careful.

The tragic truth is that Singapore is a remarkably small and vulnerable state. We cannot afford bad governance. In fact, it is part of our destiny that we have to have exceptional governance to survive and do well.

■ Isn't it the case that most countries cannot afford bad governance?

Many of the leading democracies have had bad governance and they can thrive and do well.

There are many countries in the world that can and have survived bad governance. The most controversial example, of course, is the United States, where you have this remarkable degree of political polarisation and where the government actually shut down. That's actually quite shocking.

If ever the Singapore Government gets shut down, Singapore is finished. You know, there will be an exodus and loss of confidence by our foreign investors.

We are the most open, the most globalised city in the world, so we cannot afford that kind of bad governance. We don't have a margin of failure that other countries have.

■ Then are we better off if we maintain the status quo and try and prevent this polarisation from ever happening here?

Well, I think there's no such thing as preserving the status quo anywhere in the world. The status quo is changing everywhere.

Take the case of China. As you know, China was run by the Com-

munist Party of China under Mao Zedong, then under Deng Xiaoping, now under Xi Jinping. But it is a fact that the Communist Party of China under Mao was completely different from the Communist Party under Deng and, similarly, the Communist Party under Deng was completely different from the Communist Party under Xi.

So, in theory, you can have the same party in power, but if the party adapts and changes and responds to the new political environment, then it remains vibrant and dynamic.

In Singapore, the biggest change we will have to deal with is that there will be a louder opposition voice in Parliament. I think that's inevitable, and something that's manageable.

■ And do you think this will be good for Singapore?

My job is to be an analyst. The biggest danger that an analyst faces is that of passing moral judgments. My job is to be very realistic and to try and anticipate political futures. So I anticipate that we will live in an environment where there will be a greater number of opposition voices.

Now, whether that's good or bad, you have to wait and see. It could be bad in the sense that you could have a paralysed government. But it could be good in the sense that you could have a government that is on its toes and responding more effectively to political challenges.

And, since the theory of evolution has taught us that competition leads to a situation where the fittest survive, then in many ways when you have greater competition you could have more dynamic and fit people and processes as a result.

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Professor Mahbubani's book, *Can Singapore Survive?* (Straits Times Press, \$26.75), is available in most bookshops. The SG50+ Conference, Singapore at 50: What lies ahead? runs from July 2-3 at the Shangri-La Hotel.

## What's for supper

### Professor Kishore Mahbubani's residence

- Home-cooked chicken curry, steamed vegetables and prata
- Home-made pandan chiffon cake
- Wine

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