

WASHINGTON POST COLUMNIST IN ONE-HOUR EXCHANGE WITH P.M. LEE

Cases against bloggers dominate dialogue with PM

SINGAPORE – A dialogue themed on what lies ahead for Singapore played out yesterday with discussion on two court cases against bloggers now.

Amid the questions being posed — from Singapore’s relationship with China vis-a-vis the Republic’s ties with the United States, race and religion,

the threat of terrorism, and the role of ASEAN — what cropped up repeatedly were Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s court appearance on Wednesday in a hearing to assess the damages in a defamation suit against blogger Roy Ngerng, as well as the criminal case against teenage blogger Amos Yee.

Mr Lee was taking questions from CNN host and The Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria at a one-hour session. The session was part of the “Singapore at 50: What Lies Ahead?” conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and which continues today.

The reference to Amos first came when Mr Lee spoke about freedom of speech. Although the freedom exists in Singapore, restraints are necessary in instances such as when faiths are derided or proselytising is involved. And in some cases, taking a person to court is needed, “as happened with this young man Amos Yee recently”, said Mr Lee.

“There has to be a lot of give and take because you need strict rules. But at the same time, this is an area where if you insist on going by the rules, everybody is going to be a loser. It is not possible for us to codify in a set of statutes exactly what is permissible (and) what is not permissible conduct,” he added.

Mr Lee said that with social media, “it becomes a harder problem because the restraints are less, the possibility of giving offence and the ease of taking umbrage is so much greater”.

He added: “Overnight you wake up, you can find that somebody has been unwise and everybody has become upset, and we have to run around putting out fires. It has happened more than once and I’m sure it will happen again.”

On the dominance of countries such as the US, Sweden and Israel in innovation, science and technology, Dr Zakaria said these communities are common in that there is a culture of a lack of respect for or challenging authority.

“You spent six hours yesterday in a court trying to do this, to instil a culture of respect. And isn’t it exactly the opposite of what you need for your economic future?” the US journalist asked.

In response, Mr Lee said: “You want people to stand up, not scrape and bow. But if you don’t have a certain natural aristocracy in the system, people who are respected because they have earned that and we level everything down to the lowest common denominator, then I think society will lose out ... If you end up with anarchy, it doesn’t mean that you’ll be delivered with brilliance.”

Dr Zakaria parried, questioning whether the Government is overly paranoid about anarchy. He added that he feels Mr Lee should have ignored Ngerng, saying: “Look at what people call Barack Obama on the Internet. It would have made your blood curdle.”

When questions were open to the floor, the focus was again moved back on Ngerng’s and Amos’ cases by medical professor Paul Tambyah, who is a volunteer with the opposition Singapore Democratic Party. With the Government’s focus seemingly “shifted to minor players, such as a rude and insensitive teenager ... (and) the son of a chai tow kway seller who wrote 400 blog articles”, will there be more space for diverse views in the future, asked Dr Tambyah.

Mr Lee replied that one can discuss anything, but “you can’t defame anybody you like”. He added: “If you can’t redress defamation, how can I clear my name when somebody defames me?”

JOY FANG

China ‘understands S’pore’s position’
● Asked whether China was displeased with Singapore’s relationship with the United States, Mr Lee said the Chinese are realists and understand the Republic’s position. “Of course they would prefer us to speak up more often, in a more closely aligned way with what they would prefer on every single issue, but they understand that we are different countries and it’s not possible.”