



PM Lee Hsien Loong at a dialogue hosted by columnist Fareed Zakaria at an Institute of Policy Studies conference yesterday. Asked by Mr Zakaria if Singapore needed to embrace a "culture of disrespect" in order to become more economically vibrant, Mr Lee responded that anarchy does not guarantee brilliance – and that Singapore is not as orderly as outsiders seem to think. ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

## China respects national interests of S'pore

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh

China respects Singapore as a sovereign country with its own interests, despite differences in views and policies between the two from time to time, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

"Of course they would prefer us to speak up more often, and in a more closely aligned way with what they prefer on every single issue, but they understand that we are different countries and it's not possible," he said at a dialogue with Washington Post newspaper columnist Fareed Zakaria.

They were discussing the changing balance of power in Asia, with the rise of China.

As for the type of world power China plans to be, Mr Lee said that for now, it remains to be seen.

He noted that one reason America has been successful as a world power is its willingness to give other countries space.

"You could disagree with them, you could argue with them, they do twist your arm sometimes, but they are benevolent hegemonists," said Mr Lee. "Now, whether other great powers take the same approach, or whether they will take a purely realpolitik view – big powers do what they will and small countries suffer what they must – that's to be seen."

The Chinese, he added, say that all countries – big and small – will work on the basis of equality, mutual respect and benefit. This was met with doubt from Mr Zakaria, who said: "That's the rhetoric, but Chinese policy is fairly realpolitik."

Mr Lee acknowledged his statement and said how China planned to operate remains to be seen.

If China does go down the path of realpolitik, he said, it will face pushback from many countries. "They want their place in the sun, and if they can get it under the status quo, I think they would prefer that because they know that conflict is not a straightforward matter," he said.

Mr Zakaria also asked Mr Lee what he thought was China's opinion of Singapore-US ties, wondering if it would see Singapore as an "American outpost in South-east Asia". Chinese representation at the funeral of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March fell short, he noted. China's highest-ranking representative was Vice-President Li Yuanchao, while the US' top representative was former president Bill Clinton.

Mr Lee replied, to laughter: "Oh, I would not read too much into attendance at funerals." The Chinese, he said, are realists who understand the US is important to Singapore. He also brought up the South China Sea issue, noting that though some Asean countries are claimants in the dispute, "every Asean country wants good relations with China".

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# S'pore political system is one that benefits all: PM

Govt sees its job as looking after as many as possible, not just catering to certain groups

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Singapore's political system has remained continually dominated by one party, even though this may be unusual for developed economies, because it is a system from which everyone benefits, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

Unlike many other governments whose policies are tailored towards certain groups, the Singapore Government sees its job as "to look after as large a proportion of the population as possible, while still giving people the incentive to vote for this Government, so that they will get some benefit from it", Mr Lee said.

"I have a multiracial mix (in population) but I have a mix where everybody has benefited from the system, where everybody has a stake and can see that it is working for us. And it has prevailed so far," he said.

Speaking at a dialogue hosted by Washington Post columnist Fareed

Zakaria at an Institute of Policy Studies conference themed Singapore At 50: What Lies Ahead?, PM Lee resisted Mr Zakaria's characterisation of Singapore as one of the only developed economies in the world that has not transitioned to a multi-party liberal democracy.

"We are a multi-party liberal democratic system," Mr Lee said. "The outcome is not what you would like to see, but that is what Singaporean voters have decided."

But he noted that the ruling People's Action Party does not wholly disregard politics: "If we take the view that if you voted against me, I should help you first (as) that shows my largeness of spirit, then I think you will go extinct as a government."

In the hour-long dialogue at the start of a two-day conference on Singapore's post-jubilee future, PM Lee staunchly defended Singapore's legal constraints on defamation, and racial and religious offence.

Asked by Mr Zakaria if Singapore

needed to embrace a "culture of disrespect" in order to become more economically vibrant, Mr Lee responded that anarchy does not guarantee brilliance – and that Singapore is not as orderly as outsiders seem to think.

"I spent six hours in court. If this were a very orderly place, would I have to do that?" he said to laughter from the 640-strong audience at the Shangri-La Hotel. A day earlier, Mr Lee was cross-examined for six hours by blogger Roy Ngerng, whom he had sued for defamation.

Later, when one participant criticised the harsh treatment meted out to Mr Ngerng, as well as to teenager Amos Yee, who was found guilty of uploading an obscene image and making remarks intended to hurt the feelings of Christians, Mr Lee said Singapore has limits to free speech, like many other countries.

"You can say and discuss anything you like, but you can't defame anybody you like," he said. "If you can't redress defamation, then how can I clear my name when somebody defames me?"

Despite the multiracial fabric of modern-day Singapore, racial and religious sensitivities will never

go away, Mr Lee said.

"You can give offence even without intending to, so when you intend to give offence, I think we have to act against it," he said.

Mr Lee added that young Singaporeans do not lack the drive and hunger of their forebears, but are missing an understanding of the real vulnerability that race and religion remain for the nation.

"The problem has not gone. Religion has become more prominent (and) everybody's more conscious of their identity," he said. A terror attack would also tear Singapore apart, as the suspicion and fear generated will change people's interactions with one another for a long time, he added.

Crediting Singapore's success to "good luck, good history and good leadership", Mr Lee acknowledged that the Government is "worried all the time (so much so) that people say we are paranoid".

But the success tiny Singapore has had is "an entirely unnatural state of affairs", he said.

"And one we should count our blessings for, if not every day, then every election!"

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### UNNATURAL STATE OF AFFAIRS

You don't expect to go back to how you were in the 1960s. Yet, it is not natural that you stay in this place. Is it to be expected that a population of 3.5 million citizens and maybe a million foreign workers will have the best airline in the world, the best airport in the world, one of the busiest ports in the world, and an education and healthcare and housing system which gives us a per capita GDP higher than America or Australia or Japan? It's an entirely unnatural state of affairs.

PM LEE HSIEN LOONG, on why Singapore has to worry about its survival all the time

### WILL PM STAY ANOTHER 10 YEARS?

I strongly prefer not to. This is a job which needs a young man, people with energy, people who will be there and can connect with young people, and will fight the battles with (them), not for five or 10 years but for 20, 30, 40 years to come. And you need somebody of that generation.

PM LEE, replying to a member of the audience on whether he is prepared to stay in office for another 10 years

