

SG50+ Conference

# 'Matter of time' before S'pore has non-Chinese PM

People share experiences and the common space is expanding, says DPM Tharman

Wong Siew Ying

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam has said it is a matter of time before Singapore gets a non-Chinese prime minister.

"It seems to me inevitable that at some point, a minority prime minister - Indian, Malay, Eurasian, or some mixture - is going to be a feature of the political landscape.

"We've got a meritocracy, it is an open system," he said yesterday, noting that people share experiences like national service and are educated largely in English, and that the common space is expanding.

But he does not see himself taking on the job, he said when replying to Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria, who had asked whether Singapore could see an Indian prime minister.

Mr Zakaria was chairing a dialogue at the SG50+ Conference on what lies ahead for Singapore, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

DPM Tharman, who is also the Finance Minister, said: "Singapore is evolving. The common space where everyone is growing up in is much larger than it used to be."

"It is a pretty strong common space, an education system where everyone is educated with first-language English. You go through common experiences together, national service, so it is a matter of time."

When Mr Zakaria asked if he would do the job, Mr Tharman drew a sporting analogy.

"Let me put it this way. We all have our preferences and I was always, in sports, playing centre-half rather than centre-forward. I enjoy playing half-back and making the long passes, but I am not the striker.

"Unless I am forced to be, and I don't think I will be forced to it because we've got choices. We won't always get it the way we expect it to be, but we think very hard about succession in Singapore."

He added: "We've got a crop of people who are in the fray already and entering the fray who will provide future leadership."

The question of whether and when Singapore may see a minority prime minister has come up in recent years. Days after Mr Barack Obama was elected in 2008, becoming the first black American president, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked whether Singapore was ready for a non-Chinese prime minister at a dialogue with Malay-Muslim community leaders.

PM Lee said he thought it was possible for Singapore to have a non-Chinese prime minister, but it may not happen soon. He also acknowledged that attitudes towards race had shifted as English provided more of a common ground.

At yesterday's hour-long dialogue, a member of the audience asked Mr Tharman what he felt were the "key tenets of a more positive narrative of an ageing Singapore" and ways to achieve it.



Asked whether he would be prime minister, DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam said he did not see himself taking on the job. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Mr Tharman said his vision for the country 50 years from now is one where people are encouraged, have a passion for learning throughout their lives and can age actively.

And more importantly, to go beyond what Singapore has achieved in multiculturalism.

"The Singapore of the future should be not just about four circles and a common space in between which is neutral... It is also about overlapping circles," he said.

"It is having a love for diversity," he added, "not just tolerant of each other, not just accommodating... but something deeper than that."

At a later panel discussion, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh noted that there had not been a Malay president since Mr Yusof Ishak in the 1960s. He asked Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong if a Malay could be elected president.

Mr Goh said making the presidency an elected one did not preclude Malays, but acknowledged that one man, one vote might see the Malay candidate struggling to get elected.

He, however, added that "if good candidates came along... the time will come when the Malay candidate would be elected".

wongsy@sph.com.sg

• Additional reporting by Charissa Yong

## Having a dominant party in politics is beneficial: Tharman

One-party states with no political competition face a disadvantage, but having a dominant player in politics is an edge, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at a dialogue.

He did not, however, elaborate on the advantage. Mr Tharman also said Singapore is not a one-party state and that the ruling party had to be subjected to serious competition, as it was.

His remarks prompted dialogue moderator Fareed Zakaria, a Washington Post columnist, to ask if the competition was serious as the People's Action Party (PAP) occupied most of the seats in Parliament. "That's an outcome, that's not a design," Mr Tharman said.

The PAP holds 79 out of 87 elected seats in Parliament, with the Workers' Party holding seven, and one seat is vacant after the death of Tanjong Pagar GRC MP and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March.

As he acknowledges that competition is useful, Mr Tharman was asked if there was some inherent virtue in having different political parties lead the country.

While such rotation makes for a meaningful debate in theory, he said, in practice, "do you put your citizenry at risk by saying, 'Look, let's try this out, and see how it works?'"

Mr Tharman said he would rather let others try it out, and that Singapore preserves its current system.

He also said the dominant party has to be accountable to the people, both through a vote that comes through an election once every five years, as well as in between. "People see results... Singaporeans are not fools at all. They know what's what, they know whether things are working and whether they are not. And they will have to judge."

He added: "So it only works if you're subjected to contest, and you're held accountable."

Mr Tharman said he spends about one-third of his week on the ground interacting with people by attending community events and visiting residents in their homes.

"It's not what you see in typical one-party states, not even what you see in a multi-party state," he said.

Wong Siew Ying

# Chance of another Lehman moment 'very low'

The likelihood of the Greek debt crisis becoming "another Lehman-like moment" in the international financial system is very low, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday.

"On both sides of the negotiations, there is a desire to avoid catastrophe for their own people in Greece, and on the part of Germany and the Europeans generally, avoiding a major setback to the European project," he told the SG50+ conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

The collapse of investment bank Lehman Brothers in 2008 sparked the global financial crisis.

Today, as Greece negotiates with its so-called troika of lenders on debt reduction, Mr Tharman said the twists and turns of these talks distract from the larger underlying challenge for Greece and for Europe: recognising the unsustainability of Greece's debt burden and the lack of public administration.

"They lack a public administration to collect taxes, to dispense it fairly, to preserve a sense of equity... They don't have the administration, the institutions and the trust of their citizens to be able to implement anything," Mr Tharman said.

He added that this trust has been weakened and Greece's creditors were partly to blame for demanding too much austerity, causing too much pain to the population.

Moderator Fareed Zakaria then asked Mr Tharman what he would do if Singapore took over Greece.

Mr Tharman rephrased the question: "What if we were Greece? And we had a Greece situation here?"

"There has to be great value in politics of speaking straight: Telling people what the problems are, telling people how there has to be some pain, in order that we see the light at the end of the tunnel," he said. "Everyone has to adjust. Let's share in the pain but let's work our way out of this."

Words had to be backed up by actions too, "because the population only believe what you say if they see you doing it and they see you doing it repeatedly, and with some firmness and assurance".

At a later panel, former British prime minister John Major said the euro zone agreement had been premature as its economies were not operating at the same level of efficiency as one another. He predicts Europe will keep Greece "on a drip-feed system inside the euro zone, and they would do it... at the 59th minute of the 23rd hour".

Mr Tharman said he spends about one-third of his week on the ground interacting with people by attending community events and visiting residents in their homes.

"It's not what you see in typical one-party states, not even what you see in a multi-party state," he said.

Wong Siew Ying

# S'pore voters are astute, says ESM Goh

Charissa Yong

Singaporean voters are astute in their collective vote and have chosen when and how to calibrate between showing approval and unhappiness towards the Government, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said yesterday.

Past general elections have shown this, he noted, adding: "May they remain rational and wise."

Speaking at a conference themed "Singapore at 50: What Lies Ahead", Mr Goh said Singapore's good governance is owing to both citizens and political parties.

To sustain this, Singaporeans must vote for the party that they believe is best able to govern, and not treat elections like "circuses, auctions, beauty contests, or *tikam tikam* (Malay for select randomly)".

As for political parties, Mr Goh said their task is to seek out and encourage good people who can govern to run for elections.

This is so that whichever party wins can form a Cabinet that is exceptional to run the country.

Also, those who can best run the country must see political leadership as a noble calling, and step forward to run for office, he said.



ESM Goh Chok Tong (right) said past general elections have shown Singaporean voters knew when and how to calibrate between showing approval and unhappiness towards the Government. He was speaking yesterday during a conference panel on effective governance with former British prime minister John Major (left). Professor Kishore Mahbubani (centre) chaired the session. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Mr Goh was speaking on a panel with former British prime minister John Major on effective governance in modern-day democracies.

Later, he added that persuading public servants in Singapore to join politics has not been difficult in his experience because they understand the stakes involved.

"If good people don't come in, then this place can't run as successfully as before."

"The private sector is the difficult," he said, referring to the challenge of persuading corporate titans to take the political plunge.

But democratic governance is now more complex and challenging in the face of changing and ever-rising expectations of citizens, and the rise of technology and social media, said Mr Goh.

"When I first became an MP, it was 1, 2, 3, 4 - one wife, two children, 3-room flat, four wheels.

"For the generation after me, it was 5Cs - cash, car, condominium, credit card and country club," he said.

Not only do the current generation of Singaporeans desire something different - work-life balance - but they are also diverse, with different groups wanting different things.

"The party that can capture all these wants and hold out hope that these wants can be realised - will be the party that can win the

elections," he said.

His fellow panellist, Mr Major, said that while social media can help governments be more targeted in their programmes, it can also pressure them to shy away from tough but necessary policies.

Mr Goh observed that people are often more willing to listen to leaders talk about long-term challenges when in a time of crisis.

"In good times, I think very few people will have time to listen to

what they call 'scaremongering just to win votes,'" he said.

Summing up, Mr Major said the secret to Singapore's success is that the country has "always judged what is in its long-term interests and acted with determination to implement it".

He added: "Singapore looks to the future more rigorously than any other nation I know."

charyong@sph.com.sg