



At the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum last night, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said he hoped Singaporeans would remain focused on why and what they are voting for – choosing the next government. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

# PAP's policies are about the heartland: Ng Eng Hen

Party has stayed true to its roots and looked after the ordinary S'porean, says minister

Aaron Low

The People's Action Party (PAP) always crafted policies for people living in the heartland and has stayed true to its roots and looked after the interest of the ordinary Singaporean, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen.

It does this because the centre of gravity of the political system has always been with those living in three-room and four-room flats, he added.

"All our policies are about the heartland. That's our base, the strength in our political system," said Dr Ng, who is the PAP's organising secretary.

"And I think if we deviate from there, we will be in trouble."

The move by opposition parties to contest all seats at the upcoming general election is a good one because it gives people the choice to decide how Singapore should move forward, he said at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum at the National University of Singapore last night.

But amid the heat of the hustings, he hoped that Singaporeans would remain focused on why they are voting and what they are voting on – which is to choose their leaders and the next government.

"On Nomination Day, there is no certainty that there will be a PAP government," he said.

Dr Ng fielded a range of questions from students, from whether women should enlist as part of National Service, to the economic challenges and rising non-traditional security threats that Singapore faces.

On women, he said there was no real need to enlist them as technology has allowed the Singapore Armed Forces to fight effectively.

The rise of technology, however, has also created new security threats such as information warfare and cyber threats that the Government is closely monitoring.

Students also asked about the upcoming general election, which

is widely expected to be called within weeks, and what Dr Ng thought about the younger generation's attitude towards politics here.

He dismissed suggestions that young Singaporeans were politically apathetic, noting that a lack of activism could simply be because things worked in the system here.

And it is this system – which has been established on the pillars of trust, integrity and zero tolerance for corruption – that allowed Singapore to punch above its own weight.

Dr Ng said bigger countries sat down to talk to Singapore because the country always delivered on what it promised.

The Government's fiscal prudence and lack of corruption were also what allowed it to be able to fund major social spending programmes such as the Pioneer Generation Package, which cost more than \$8 billion, up front.

"I'd rather have people with honesty and integrity to run a less-than-perfect system, rather than dishonest people run a perfect system," said Dr Ng.

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HEART OF POLITICAL SYSTEM

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DR NG ENH EN, PAP's organising secretary



**THEN & NOW: THE PADANG.** The area around the Padang and City Hall witnessed key moments in Singapore's history, from the surrender of Japanese forces to the British in 1945 to the first and many subsequent National Day Parades from 1966. The photo on the left is from 1953.

This year (left below), the Padang was the site where 450,000 people queued for hours through rain or shine to pay their respects to the late founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew at Parliament House. It also hosted this year's NDP, which celebrated the country's 50th year of independence. The Singapore skyline and the Singapore River today also reflect the country's tremendous social and economic transformation over the past 50 years.



## Call to help shape future of Singapore

Charissa Yong

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen has challenged younger Singaporeans to build the future of Singapore and shape it into something they can continue to be proud of.

"If anyone tells you we're done building, reject that. We're not done building Singapore. There's so much we can do," he said. "In SG75, SG100, will the Singapore you live in be special to you, to the world? I challenge each of you to make it so."

He was speaking to 160 students at a forum at the National University of Singapore at Kent Ridge last night.

Over the course of an hour, he charted Singapore's progress over a century, citing historically significant events at the Padang and used pictures to show how far Singapore had come over the last 100 years.

In the early days, Singapore developed but did not have the opportunity to decide its future. The British built City Hall in 1929 and laid the foundation for Singapore's administration system.

Then in 1942, the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese – a sombre reminder that it is better for Singaporeans to determine their own future, said Dr Ng. By 1945, the Japanese forces lost and



Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew giving a speech in front of City Hall at the Padang in 1961. Last night, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen spoke of how Mr Lee had insisted on a multiracial, multi-religious country. And under him, Singapore took shape as a meritocratic country, said Dr Ng.

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surrendered Singapore to the British in a ceremony at City Hall.

Japanese prisoners-of-war were marched past City Hall, and forced to work on repairing the Padang.

Eventually, the country gained independence, but not before having limited self-determination under the British, self-governance, and a short-lived union with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965.

The Padang witnessed it all, in front of City Hall, where the declarations of self-government in 1959 and union with Malaysia in 1963 took place.

At this point, Singapore's path was not set, he said, noting it would have been intuitively easier to pander to chauvinist instincts of the

dominant Chinese community.

But founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew insisted on a multiracial, multi-religious country. And under him, Singapore took shape as a meritocratic country, said Dr Ng, who recounted how he personally grew up in a rental flat but went on to work at a top cancer centre.

The view of the skyline from the Padang is also testament to Singapore's spirit of triumph over adversity. The Suntec City project began after the 1984 recession and property glut. But the Suntec group's \$1.2 billion purchase of the site in 1988 turned out to be a good investment after the economy bounced back.

More recently, at the week of

mourning for the late Mr Lee in March, some 450,000 people paid their respects at Parliament House, queuing for hours on the Padang.

Turning to the future, he said the students would likely see Singapore celebrate its 75th and 100th year of independence.

"The next 50 years will be shaped by your visions, your dreams. You are a historically privileged group. All of you will very likely experience SG50 and SG100."

Dr Ng later fielded questions on a range of topics, including the upcoming general election, apathetic voters and Singapore's defence, and the impact of slower economic growth.

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