

Minister and Banyan Tree chief discuss if rule by single political party is best for Singapore

Multi-party system not for us: Minister

✓ **CHARISSA YONG, THE STRAITS TIMES**

A one-party system may give Singapore its best shot at success, because it is a small country that needs to stay nimble, said Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung (above, right) yesterday at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference.

But Banyan Tree executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping warned that one-party systems face the danger of its political elites becoming slow to change, resulting in a culture of entitlement and corruption.

He added that the most desirable scenario would be a system of robust internal competition within the People's Action Party (PAP).

Likewise, Mr Ong stressed that the PAP must stay open-minded and grounded in reality, and have integrity beyond reproach.

Both were on a panel discussing whether rule by a single political party is best for Singapore.

The panel addressed the possibility of Singapore becoming a two- or multi-party system.

In his speech, Mr Ong made the case that single-party rule is the best way for a small country like Singapore to succeed.

He added that the party need not

be the PAP, but whichever party is the most capable.

For a multi-party system to form, said Mr Ong, there must first be at least two sufficiently different paths for Singapore to take, and political views distinct enough for different parties to uphold.

But Singapore is not big enough to have geographically separate towns that evolve drastically different views on national issues, he said.

Another reason he cited is that Singapore needs to stay nimble and move fast in a changing global environment.

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Mr Ong questioned whether it could do so with a multi-party system.

"A country's success is always idiosyncratic and can never be replicated wholesale by another.

"The formula for success is based on different political processes and ours happens to be a one-party system," said Mr Ong, who was recently made an organising secretary of the PAP and has been touted as a possible future prime minister.

He added that complacency, elitism and corruption are not inevitable outcomes of single-party rule and have shown up across all political systems.

But Mr Ho said history showed that a ruling political party that faces no competition tends to turn complacent.

Citing the declines of India's Indian National Congress and the Kuomintang in Taiwan, Mr Ho said a founding party's political values can be passed down over three or four generations of leaders.

Beyond that, complacency overwhelms the self-discipline instilled by the party's pioneers and its political culture erodes, he told the 960 policymakers, businessmen and students in the audience.

Despite his views, he thought that the PAP had the best chance of any long-term party to set a new record for staying in power, because of its "ability to self-correct and obsessively talk about problems" and find solutions to them.

He suggested that the party introduce a formal way for competing policies to be aired internally.

To this suggestion, Mr Ong said that the PAP needed to be as pluralistic a party as possible and must take in people with different views.

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