

# Multi-party political system could ruin S'pore: Ong Ye Kung

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**SINGAPORE** – Should the political landscape here evolve into one with more than one dominant political party, it

could mean a lot more “jostling on the ground” as unions and various associations and even the media become split as parties seek support, said Education Minister Ong Ye Kung (Higher Education and Skills).

And should political parties align themselves along “sinister” lines, such as by race, language or religion, this “toxic mix” could leave the country broken, said Mr Ong, noting that even as political parties represent diverse views, that very same essence can “take a nasty twist, sowing discord and dividing societies”.

Mr Ong set out these scenarios yesterday at the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) Singapore Perspectives conference, where he spoke at a session on a multi-party system in Singapore.

The Republic’s formula for success, noted Mr Ong, who is among those touted to be Singapore’s fourth-generation of leaders, could well be a one-party system.

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One major long-term risk, he noted, is that a multi-party system could slow down decision-making and nimbleness while navigating an “ever-changing world and environment”.

“Imagine, if we have a multi-party system back in 1965, will we have come so far so quickly?” said Mr Ong in a speech opening the session.

But a single-party system in the case of Singapore is not a prescription but an outcome of choice resulting from elections, he pointed out. For example, the state of Massachusetts in the United States has been dominated by the Democrats for a long period, he said, adding: “Smallness and concentration often do go together.”

If the people of a country wish for a multi-party system, it will be so. “The job of the opposition parties is to point out the risks of a single-party rule. That is their job. But the job of the PAP (People’s Action Party) is to make sure that Singapore continues to flourish. We will also point out the risks of a multi-party system and, most importantly, we must always keep out the ills of complacency, elitism and corruption,” he said.

Mr Ong’s remarks are the latest on the issue of multi-party systems, which was also touched on by Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen during a dialogue with Yale-NUS students on Jan 13. Dr Ng had said that the extent of progress in a country should not be measured by its number of political parties.

In 2015, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam had said that one-party states with no political competition face a disadvantage, but

having a dominant player in politics is an edge.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also weighed in on this topic in 2011 at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum, saying that a two-party system is not workable in Singapore as there is not enough talent to form two “A teams”, and it could also bring about a division in society based on class or racial lines.

Yesterday, Mr Ong noted that the civil service would be the most tested among institutions under a multi-party system, as it has to be neutral and serve whichever party forms the Government.

“You can work on one set of policies for five years, then someone new comes along and says, let’s redo everything, or undo everything. It can be frustrating and very demoralising,” he said. For instance, the Affordable Care Act in the US has been repealed, and the US is set to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership after President Donald Trump took power, he said.

In the face of all these risks, the Government has to make sure that the current system continues to work, and the PAP must ensure that it is open-minded and keeps up with the times, and comes up with policies that are “rooted in the ground”.

Asked by Ambassador-at-large Professor Tommy Koh during the panel discussion whether it was in the national interest to evolve a credible opposition party to replace the PAP if it were to falter, Mr Ong said the possibility of the PAP losing power always has to be “at the back of our minds”.

For example, the PAP could become corrupt and complacent. “Then

... it deserves to lose. And I have faith that if that happens, there will be fine men and women who would form an alternative,” he said.

Also, others more capable than the PAP could come along and claim the mandate. “I would say there is robustness in the system, so long as we continue to identify good talent,” he said.

Banyan Tree Holdings executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping, also a speaker at the panel discussion, added that the most desirable scenario would be a system where there is “robust internal

institutionalised competition” within the PAP. This system, he suggested, would allow the flexibility of continuing on one-party rule, or to split into two parties.

“If the PAP can contain the different tendencies of thinking within itself, it would go on as a one-party dominant system for a long time,” he explained. If it cannot, then the party can break into two, with the advantage of leaders on both sides that had considerable experience in governance, he concluded.



# Terrex issue is collateral damage from testy US-China ties: Tommy Koh

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**SINGAPORE** – The Republic’s foreign policy has been premised on cultivating close ties with other countries without aligning itself to any superpower, but it may become more difficult to do this as Sino-US relations are very likely to turn confrontational, said Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh.

Speaking as a conference moderator at the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) Singapore Perspectives conference, Professor Koh, said that all countries, including small nations such as Singapore, would be part of the “collateral damage” in such a scenario.

“It narrows the room for small countries like Singapore,” said Prof Koh, who is special adviser to IPS. “It already has a repercussion on us. I think the detention of the nine Terrex vehicles in Hong Kong has to do with the increasingly acrimonious relations across the straits, and between Beijing and Washington.”

Since November, nine Singapore Armed Forces armoured vehicles have been in the custody of the Hong Kong authorities, after being seized en route from Taiwan to Singapore.

Professor Joseph Liow, dean of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, a panellist at the session, felt that despite its newly inaugurated President gunning for an “America

First” approach, the US is unlikely to withdraw completely from Asia, given that it has much to gain from maintaining its ties with the region.

The Trump administration could “scale back” on its commitment to the region, but since the end of the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the US, stable Sino-US ties have contributed to a “strategic equilibrium” in East Asia, allowing the region to flourish economically, while keeping the pressures of competition at bay, said Prof Liow.

Bilateral relations have also expanded from trade to discussions on climate change, terrorism and cybersecurity over the years.

“I think that Chinese leaders in

private will grudgingly admit that the US has had a restraining hand on Japan and Taiwan in this region,” he said. Even if China wanted to limit US reach, it would not want the US to “entirely disengage” from this region.

Similarly, the US would still benefit from continuous engagement with this region, in terms of economics and security, said Prof Liow.

But he acknowledged that there have been concerns over receding US interest in the region in the wake of the Trump administration, and the growing assertiveness exhibited by China.

Against this backdrop, taking sides would result in a zero-sum game, he added. If taking a stand is inevitable, Singapore would have to weigh national interest with Asean cohesion, and ensure that there would be no interference in domestic politics, he advised.

“If making a choice means making concessions ... other states may read the wrong signals or draw the wrong conclusions from our actions — (for example), Singapore is a pushover,” said Prof Liow.



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**Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh**