

Post Covid-19, S'pore has opportunity to reinvent itself: Ong

Republic must get its politics right to do so, if it is to continue to stay relevant, he says

Tham Yuen-C
Senior Political Correspondent

Singapore must constantly reinvent itself to stay relevant and a great opportunity for reinvention lies in the post-Covid-19 world, said Health Minister Ong Ye Kung yesterday. But for that it must get its politics right, he added.

Comparing the crisis to a reset button that forced people to rethink the way they did things, he pointed to the seismic changes the pandemic has brought about

that Singapore could ride on.

People can work from both home and office, he said. The concept of peak hours will have to be rethought. Digitalisation is here to stay. The importance of home recovery and primary care has been underscored.

“Through the pandemic, we have positioned ourselves as a hub for vaccine manufacture and distribution,” said Mr Ong, who was speaking on cities, countries and resilience at the Singapore Perspectives 2022 forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

But Singapore needed to be nim-

ble and run an effective city-state, said Mr Ong.

Its founding generation has built a good government with an effective executive branch, a non-politicised civil service, and a judicial system that upholds the rule of law without fear or favour, he said. Its Parliament is formed through free and fair elections.

But affairs of the state cannot run away from politics, which can keep powers in check when done right, and destabilise societies when allowed to go wrong, said Mr Ong.

“Rather than endless bickering and stalemates, the political process must be constructive and help bridge divides. The objective of politics must be to help the country find a way forward even if

the decisions involve very difficult trade-offs.”

Recounting the stories of great cities past and present, he said Singapore cannot be modelled after any as “we are a city, we are a state, we are also a nation of one people, all rolled into one”.

Like New York City, Singapore is a modern-day metropolis that needs to be connected to the world to thrive, he said. That is why it has to be like a smartphone that runs a good operating system, “so that it is not easy, though not impossible, to switch out of Singapore”.

The minister, who co-chairs the multi-ministry task force on Covid-19 along with Finance Minister Lawrence Wong and Trade and Industry Minister Gan Kim Yong, said coping with the pandemic has tested Singapore’s mettle as a city, but also thrown up opportunities it could grasp.

As nations grappled with inequality, protectionism and climate change, they needed a strong state – like that in China’s imperial capital Chang’an, now known as Xi’an – to steer them.

“Our policies need to be consistent for the long term to make an impact. Unlike bigger countries, we cannot afford to be caught in fractious politics with frequent change of Governments and reorientation of policies,” said Mr Ong.

This does not preclude healthy discourse and the proper function-

ing of checks and balances.

“The success of the Singapore state depends on our ability to achieve both aims,” he added.

Like the neolithic settlement of Jericho in the Middle East, Singapore is made up of people coming together to forge a common destiny, said Mr Ong. But Singaporeans are far more diverse, making the country far more complex than any ancient city.

“We are working on what it means to be Singaporean, day by day,” he said, citing students singing the national anthem, different communities living side by side in HDB estates and young men serving national service. “These are all acts of nation-building. Many of these come through deliberate policies and programmes implemented by the state.”

He said there was growing awareness about what it meant to be Singapore – a nation which created opportunities for its people, upheld meritocracy and gave every community a place under the sun.

“With all of these, we will determine our own future and be a city, state and nation that continues to thrive for many years to come.”

yuenc@sph.com.sg

**SEE THE BIG STORY • A4,
OPINION • A24**