Singapore can quickly lose its buzz: SM Goh

Citizens must think about next phase of country's development

By LYNN KAN

SINGAPORE is a city of buzz, but that buzz can quickly fizzle out, said Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong last night at the Nanyang Technological University Ministerial Forum.

Speaking to about 1,200 students in the NTU auditorium on the topic 'Singapore - A City of Buzz,' Mr Goh pointed out that Singapore is a buzz-worthy city with a business-friendly, bustling economy, vibrant cosmopolitan lifestyle and, most of all, an engaged citizenry that gives Singapore a sense of belonging.

However, all that could turn to dust if future generations of Singaporeans fail 'to collectively think about the challenges and goals in our next phase of development'.

The worry on many students' minds was the notion of 'ownership' of Singapore. Mr Goh noted that in the political sphere, the government recognises 'the growing desire of Singaporeans to want more say over matters which affect their lives and future'. He added that 'this is a healthy development'.

As such, the upcoming General Election - whose date has not yet been fixed - will be a watershed moment for Singapore. 'It will be an election that is important to you, whether you are old enough to vote or not,' said Mr Goh. 'Out of this election, we must produce Singapore's fourth prime minister and a core team of younger ministers who will take over from the present team.'

Responding to one student who felt that there is a gulf between the government and the people, Mr Goh said that try as the government may, it cannot reach out to every member of the electorate and more active participation from Singaporeans is needed.

Other students were concerned about the inundation of foreign workers and non-Singaporean immigrants affecting Singaporeans' ownership of their country.

Mr Goh said: 'You can rectify your disenchantment by totally rejecting foreign workers, but think through the consequences. Singapore will shrink in size and shrivel and wither away and you won't feel proud of this place. I don't think anyone in Singapore wants that. So we will be moderating the inflow of foreign workers.'

At the same time, he said, foreign workers interested in calling Singapore home would be integrated and taught to become Singaporean. 'We don't do this for them. We do these things for ourselves,' he said.

Mr Goh ended the almost two-hour session with the parting shot that some hard thinking needs to be done by the next generation of Singaporeans.

'What kind of Singapore do you want?' he asked. 'To criticise is easy, but don't just end there. You've got to go to the next step which is to figure out what should be the solution. It can't be the government's job all the time, so you have to engage with us, to figure out what we can do together.

'If you decide that the solution should be left up to the government (to come up with), then you have to ask yourself, what kind of government do you want to make Singapore work.'

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