A watershed election for youth: SM

Younger ministerial team will emerge from next GE, says SM Goh

BY RACHEL CHANG

THE next General Election (GE) will be a watershed event for Singaporeans and especially the young, even if they are not yet old enough to vote, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said last night.

From the next polls, due by February 2012, Singapore’s fourth prime minister and a core team of younger ministers will emerge, he explained.

Speaking to 1,000 undergraduates at the annual Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Students’ Union Ministerial Forum, he said that the political buzz will build over the next few months in anticipation of an election.

But he was of the view that some “may not fully appreciate the purpose and importance” of general elections, which are to elect people who will govern the country, and whose policies will impact the lives of Singaporeans.

“They simply yearn for liberal Western-style democracies without considering whether these will produce a good and effective government,” he said.

Mr Goh cited an exchange of letters in The Straits Times Forum pages last month, sparked by a reader who, quoting her American husband, wrote that “democracy is just a fancy word for partisan bickering and gridlocked government”.

While saying that he did not wish not to initiate a comparison of one country’s democracy with another’s, Mr Goh wanted his young audience to ponder this question: “Is a democratic system an end to be pursued in its own right, or is it a means to select a government to look after our lives like a guardian or a trustee?”

He made clear where he stood on the question, noting there were many examples around the world to show that the letter of democracy did not necessarily deliver the spirit of good governance.

Mr Goh’s subtly stated concern about Singaporeans’ understanding of the importance of the election came in the wake of blunter comments from Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

MM Lee lamented in a New York Times interview last month that Singapore’s younger generation wanted political freedom without understanding what it would entail.

He had also argued that unfettered freedom of expression would inevitably lead to “race-based politics” that would rip Singapore society apart.

Mr Goh also implied that the Singapore context was unsuitable for bare-knuckled political combat, noting that the ruling party had “adapted” the British Westminster form of parliamentary democracy to suit Singapore’s history, culture and population mix.

As an example, he cited the recent constitutional changes which guarantee at least nine opposition members in the next Parliament, up from the current three.

This will come through measures like an expansion of the non-constituency MP scheme, which gives the “best losers” from the elections a seat in the House.

He made clear the rationale of the changes: “We have done so because we acknowledge that many people, while wanting the PAP to form the government, also want to hear non-PAP views in Parliament.”

“We welcome robust debate and rigo-
Country needs vibrant citizenry

us scrutiny in Parliament," he summed up. "It only hope our Parliament will not end up in 'parlous silence' or, worse, confrontational, divisive politics and a weak government." The theme of Mr Goh's address last night, which was followed by a 45-minute dialogue, was how Singapore can be a global city filled with "blue" and also remain a home for its citizens.

He recounted how Singapore focused mainly on building its "Brain" economy until the early 1980s, leading it to be widely mocked as being a "cultural desert" where people only cared about "make money" and making money.

Now, Singapore can be seen as a "Brain" cultural calendar filled with events from the Formula One Singapore Grand Prix to Lady Gaga concerts.

But he acknowledged that Singaporeans say they do not have enough time to enjoy the brunch: "As someone once observed, Singaporeans are strange people. They work so hard to buy their dream home but have no time to enjoy it." To resolve Singaporeans to go beyond this, he said the country needs a vibrant citizenry willing to participate in civil society and "who want to make Singapore better and not just live off Singapore".

He was later pressed on this point by NTU student Amy Quek, 25, who said that he did not feel that Singaporeans could engage in national affairs even if they wanted to. This was because govern- ment leaders seemed not to take their points of view into consideration.

"As an example, the changes made to the Human Organ Transplant Act was last March. But now automatically includes all Singaporeans as donors unless they 'opt out'.

"My family knew about it only after the bill was passed," she said. "As a young Singaporean, how do I know that my views will be heard in a direct way?"

"I see the half back in his court, Mr Goh said there was a lot of discussion leading up to the changes in 2004, and asked if he had taken an active interest in it.

"A lot of people never bother to read until it happens to them. The process of engagement is there but if you don't take an interest in what's happening, don't blame the government," he said.

As a further illustration, Mr Goh, a Marine Parade MP since 1971, recounted an exchange he often has: "When we go on house-to-house visits, very often we come to someone who says, 'I've nev- er seen you, only at election time.'"

"My reply has always been, 'Yes, how come I've never seen you?'"