
Despite different governance systems, US, China share some goals and challenges: Ong Ye Kung

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The governance systems of the United States and China are fundamentally different, having been forged through their own unique circumstances, but both systems do have goals and challenges in common, said Minister for Health Ong Ye Kung yesterday.

Both share a sense of purpose and accountability to the people they serve, and seek to achieve global peace and prosperity, create

better lives for their people, embrace science and technology, as well as uphold a vibrant international trading system, Mr Ong noted at the Lien International Conference on Good Governance.

They can also find common ground in tackling climate change, pandemics and inequality, among other things – global challenges that require the two great powers to tackle together, he added.

In terms of challenges, both systems are being reshaped by the advent of social media, which is changing society and politics.

“In a governance system based

on individual liberty and freedom... it will become even more challenging now to forge consensus and act for the long term. In a system with centralised authority, we must expect rising aspirations for agency and involvement among the population,” said Mr Ong. “In Singapore, we are experiencing probably both aspects.”

Governance systems are the outcomes of history, culture and philosophies of living and are deeply personal to a country, he said, adding that Singapore could exist as a multicultural nation because of its governance system.

“Over the last 56 years, generations of Singaporeans have put their faith in this system because it can better secure their and their children’s future... Over time, that sense of commitment and responsibility to each other grew stronger,” he said.

On the US, Mr Ong said the first immigrants sought economic opportunities and freedom to practise their religion, building a society that emphasised individualism, freedom and enterprise.

While these values have helped the US attract talent and make technological breakthroughs, they

have also resulted in a very competitive society with stark inequality and polarised politics, he noted.

In uniting the warring territories into a single empire in 221 BC, the Qin dynasty took China down the road of a consolidated system of governance, said Mr Ong.

Thus centralisation of authority has been viewed positively, and the Communist Party of China continues to rule modern China with unquestionable authority.

Mr Ong said the Chinese system has delivered impressive results, with China now the second-largest economy, adding: “It knows that without a one-person, one-vote system adopted by the West, change of power can be messy, even violent if it involved people’s uprising. It therefore takes its mandate very seriously.”

The differences that exist in the

governance systems are as profound as the differences between Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, said Mr Ong.

“If we understand how institutions of governance come about in mature societies like the US and China, we will also realise that it will be inappropriate, or in fact foolhardy, for anyone to conclude which is better than the other, which is more superior than the other, or worse, which is right and which is wrong,” he added.

“We live in an unprecedented time in history, with two great powers seeking to find a modus vivendi of engagement. In this process, we have to recognise that their governance systems are fundamentally different, and it is impossible for one to convert the other.”

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