

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



Both countries can find common ground in tackling climate change and pandemics, among other things, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said. PHOTO: REUTERS



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SINGAPORE - 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.

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 a conference on governance at Singapore Marriott Tang Plaza Hotel on Monday (Nov 22).

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

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

"In a governance system based on individual liberty and freedom, imagine, 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."

Mr Ong listed the commonalities between the two powers during his keynote speech at the two-day hybrid Lien International Conference on Good Governance, as he sought to make the point that two very different systems of governance can have areas of overlap and can provide good governance in their own way.

Governance systems are the outcomes of history, culture and philosophies of living and are deeply personal to a country, Mr Ong added.

He said 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. So either we hang together or hang separately. Over time, that sense of commitment and responsibility to each other grew stronger," he added.

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

These are the values that lie at the heart of the US as it evolved into the well-developed democracy it is today, he added.

While this has helped the US attract talent from around the world and make technological breakthroughs in areas from nuclear power to the Internet and Covid-19 vaccines, it has also resulted in a very competitive society with stark inequality and polarised politics, he noted.

China, meanwhile, has had a far longer history, with the Qin dynasty in 221 BC uniting the warring territories into a single empire, bringing peace and unity and starting the empire on the trajectory towards a consolidated system of governance, said Mr Ong.

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China also developed the first merit-based bureaucracy in the world.

Thus, centralisation of authority has been viewed positively, and in modern China, the Communist Party of China continues to rule with unquestionable authority and exercises a strict and disciplined system of appointing government officials by merit, noted Mr Ong.

He said the Chinese system has delivered impressive results, with China rising to become the second-largest economy, among other things.

Mr Ong added: "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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At the conference organised by the Nanyang Technological University's Nanyang Centre for Public Administration, the panellists also spoke about how the battle against Covid-19 had underscored the importance of good governance.

NTU Provost Ling San, in his address, noted that governments had to scramble to develop policy in response to the evolving pandemic.

He added that research has been critical in providing the trustworthy data as well as sound analytics required for coherent policies.

China Centre for Disease Control and Prevention director-general Gao Fu, who delivered a keynote speech on China's experience in combating the pandemic, noted there has been much speculation about the origins of the Sars-COV-2 virus and urged people to seek the truth through science.

While many experts believe the coronavirus emerged naturally, others have postulated that it may be the result of an accidental leak from a laboratory.

Pointing to other coronaviruses that affect humans, Dr Gao said these viruses had typically moved through several animal hosts before mutating to infect humans.

"The search for the origins is a scientific issue, and requires time to figure out," he added.
