

TEXT OF SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
MR. S. RAJARATNAM, AT THE KAMPONG GLAM CONSTITUENCY  
SIXTH NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS HELD AT THE KAMPONG  
GLAM COMMUNITY CENTRE ON SATURDAY, AUG. 14, AT 7.30 P.M.

It has become fashionable among some of our citizens to moan that democracy is in danger in Singapore because it has a one-party Government. A number of people, including some newspaper pundits, are putting in a lot of time, energy and carefully organised ignorance to convince us that a one-party Government will inevitably lead us to hell.

First it is sheer ignorance to suggest that a one-party Government is undemocratic. In fact most stable democracies are one-party governments. The majority party forms the government.

What is unusual about Singapore is not that it has a one-party Government but that it has a one-party parliament -- a parliament elected by the people.

Now the question is whether a one-party parliament is good or bad for a society?

In my view this is a meaningless question because, in practice, a one-party parliament can no more endanger democracy or neglect the interests of the people than a multi-party parliament can safeguard democracy and promote the welfare of the people.

It all depends on the quality and character of the parties concerned -- whether in government or in opposition. An opposition party consisting of bums, opportunists and morons can endanger democracy and bring about chaos, disorder and violence. This has happened and is happening in many countries.

The same can happen under a one-party parliament of bums and crooks.

Equally a one-party parliament can safeguard democracy and bring about peace, progress and prosperity. Singapore has had a one-party parliament since 1968. If you forget theory and look at the hard facts you will discover that though the P.A.P. has been in power for 12 years its greatest achievements in promoting the welfare of the people were under a one-party parliament.

As you know there was a time when we had opposition in parliament, in particular the Barisan Sosialis. You know what life was like then. We progressed far less than we did after 1968. The function of the opposition then was not to promote democracy or rapid progress or advance the welfare of the people. The function of opposition parties

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then was largely to frustrate any and every measure of the government to bring about rapid progress. The whole object of the opposition led by the Barisan for example was to sustain an atmosphere of crisis and permanent instability.

After all why should an opposition assist the ruling party to bring about rapid progress and improvement in the living conditions of the people? If they do that then the opposition parties would be slitting their own throats. If the ruling party provides good government then electoral prospects for opposition parties correspondingly diminish. The function of opposition parties generally would be to make more certain that there is bad government.

So the argument that opposition, by itself, promotes efficient government and automatically guarantees justice and welfare for the people is not true.

I am not therefore saying that a one-party parliament is a good thing. All that I am saying is that whether you have a good and just government is not necessarily dependent on whether you have a one-party parliament or a multi-party parliament.

If you have a corrupt, tyrannical and inept government then it must be opposed -- opposed and eventually overthrown. Its measures must be fought; its actions resisted. Then the role of the opposition becomes meaningful. It is no less than the constitutional overthrow of a government unfit to govern.

But if on the other hand you are convinced that the government is good, that it is doing its utmost to its best for the welfare of the people, then it is then illogical to set up an opposition just to check the government.

It is said that an opposition party is necessary in a democracy because no government can be infallible. This is true. No government is infallible. I will go further and say no one is infallible. And that includes opposition parties as well. So how can an opposition party which is as fallible as the Government ensure that the right things are done.

These are some of the reasons why much of the current discussions about democracy and opposition parties strike me as a lot of chasing of one's tail and often as not, to add to the confusion, as chasing of one another's tails.

Opposition for the sake of opposition is a meaningless slogan. I don't believe it has anything to do with promoting and strengthening democracy. It is the opium of the intellectuals. If you are a low



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grade intellectual you can win some attention by disagreeing with the Government for the sake of disagreeing. If the Government says "white" you write letters or articles in the newspapers saying that it is "black". Then your column will be read. You will be pointed to at the next cocktail reception as an original and bold thinker.

But in my view what we need are problem solving parties. These will become effective opposition parties if the ruling party shows itself to be clearly incapable of solving real and vital problems affecting the nation. Only an opposition which can come out with better solutions to problems than those offered by the ruling party can become a genuine and meaningful opposition.

But merely an ability to shout "black" simply because the Government says "white" is not the stuff out of which vigorous opposition parties are made.

So it is something of a relief to come here tonight to present credentials to members of the management and Citizens Consultative Committees. You are one of the many real pillars of democracy. Many of you don't write letters to the Press or churn out words in newspaper columns wringing your hands over the death of democracy in Singapore. You are far too busy trying to make democracy work. You spend your evenings voluntarily trying to make life a little better for the people of your constituency or district not by talking and writing about democracy but by doing things. Your main concern is to solve real problems -- not imaginary problems. For example, in Kampong Glam as in other constituencies you have tried to solve practical problems in a practical way. You have co-operated with Government whenever you thought its measures were for the good of the people.

You have disagreed with the Government when you thought otherwise. And because you are essentially problem solvers the Government has always taken your criticisms far more seriously than those that come from professional opposers.

The Government may not have conceded all the demands you made of it. But more often than not you and the Government have in a spirit of give and take reached practical compromises.

So in Kampong Glam while others talked and moaned about the weakening of democracy in Singapore you have helped to build a better society.

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For example, the new Community Centre which will rise in Kampong Glam is made possible through your efforts.. Similarly you have helped to ensure that the urban renewal programme in this constituency meets Government's objectives with the least possible dislocation and inconvenience to those affected by it.

What you have done may not get as much publicity as the utterances of professional oppositionists but long after these have gone what you have done will strengthen democracy of deeds and not words.

AUGUST 14, 1971.

(Time issued: 1630 hours)

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