

1 Aug 2017

Oral reply to Parliamentary Question on Foreign Interference in Elections

Question:

Ms Cheng Li Hui: To ask the Prime Minister (a) whether there is any risk assessment made by the Government on our vulnerability to foreign interference in our elections from both state and non-state actors; (b) what are the measures in place to safeguard Singapore from foreign interference in our elections; (c) what are the security guidelines on vigilance by political parties and candidates on this issue; and (d) how can the social media be kept free and open for political discussions whilst dealing with malicious/subversive content.

Oral reply by Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister, Prime Minister's Office (for the Prime Minister):

Foreign interference in domestic politics and electoral processes cannot be underestimated and must always be factored into our social and psychological defence. History has shown that bigger and more powerful states would seek to advance their interests by projecting their influence on, usually, smaller or less well organised ones via all instruments of power ranging from military, economic, cultural, diplomatic, to informational. We cannot expect to be immune from such external forces.

2 Singapore's small size, openness, and relatively short history have always made it challenging for us to mitigate the external influences on our systems. The advent of modern technologies, proliferation of various media platforms, rapid communication cycles, and seamless information transmission channels combine to further complicate our task of defending ourselves from external influences.

3 Our consistent position has always been that politics in Singapore is meant only for Singaporeans. We chart our own course and bear responsibility for our choices. We have various existing measures to guard ourselves and our systems from foreign interference, but we will need to evolve them in tandem with the changes in technology, media platforms and communications channels. Let me share some of our existing measures.

Existing Measures

4 First, our election laws expressly prohibit foreigners from taking part in election activities. For instance, the Political Donations Act prohibits election

candidates and political parties from accepting foreign funding. Under the Societies Act, only Singapore citizens can be members of political associations, and these associations must not have affiliation or connection with any organisation outside of Singapore that is contrary to our national interest. Beyond elections, the Public Order Act was also amended this year to make clear that the Police may refuse to grant a permit for public assemblies and processions organised by or involving the participation of foreigners or foreign entities, and directed towards political ends.

5 Second, we have measures to protect government networks and IT systems, so that they are not used by others to subvert our election process. If these systems are compromised, they can be exploited to leak information or propagate fake news to disrupt election campaigns and shape voting patterns. However, cybersecurity is a collective responsibility. Election candidates and political parties also need to safeguard their own systems. If they require advice on the security of their IT systems, they can approach SingCERT, a division of the Cyber Security Agency.

6 Third, to prevent foreigners manipulating our media platforms to influence local politics, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act and the Broadcasting Act allow the Government to restrict and control the ownership of newspapers and broadcast media. Funds from foreign sources for non-commercial purposes are prohibited for newspaper companies, broadcasting companies and corporatised online news entities.

New Challenges

7 Despite these measures, it is critical for Singaporeans ourselves to recognise that foreign influence campaigns continue to exist. The avenues of these campaigns are multi-faceted. They can take the form of surreptitious contributions, which can be seemingly harmless donations to unsuspecting Singaporeans or local organisations, so that influence and pressure can be exerted over them.

8 This threat of foreign influence is compounded by the pervasive use of the internet and social media. Our government agencies such as the National Library Board and organisations like the Media Literacy Council have also embarked on various programmes such as the Better Internet, and the Source, Understand, Research and Evaluate programme (or SURE in short), to help Singaporeans become more discerning in what we read. Nonetheless, the Government must also be able to step in to ensure that fake news which impacts society is not allowed to spread unchecked. Through consultations with stakeholders, the

Government will be introducing legislation, accompanied by public education and, where appropriate, co-regulation with industry players.

9 Madam Speaker, Singapore politics and our political processes are for Singaporeans only. The integrity of our democratic process is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders and our electorate. Each one of us must play our part by being vigilant and discerning about what we might have read or heard, in order to safeguard our democratic processes from being undermined by foreign influence. Ultimately, our best defence is a discerning electorate that recognises the realities of geopolitics and the world which we live in.