

Educate students about politics, says Shanmugam

PAP must convince young voters about virtues of current system

■ By ZAKIR HUSSAIN

FOR 50 years, the PAP has stayed in power because it has delivered progress to the people, its leaders often point out.

But Law Minister K. Shanmugam feels younger voters can erode its dominant position should the party fail to convince them that Singapore, more than most countries, needs a strong leadership and a political system that allows for effective and speedy decisions to be made.

He gave this warning to his party members in an editorial in the latest People's Action Party bi-monthly magazine, *Petir*.

Mr Shanmugam appears to have his eye on the clock when he issued his

word of caution, saying no political party had stayed in power continuously for more than 70 years.

The way for the PAP to outlive this record, he feels, is to provide greater political education for Singaporeans, in particular, students.

However, he said: "The education should not trumpet the virtues of any particular system."

Instead, students should be taught, among other things, how political systems work in different cultures, the impact of geographical and social factors on societies and why city states rise and fall.

"This will make people look carefully at the liberal democratic model and help them decide which aspects best suit Singapore," he said as he set out

how the PAP can communicate better its message that Singapore needs good governance and that only the PAP can deliver it.

His concern comes at a time when a younger generation of better-educated voters feels the political process and system in a democratic state should be based on the Western model of liberal democracy.

Mr Shanmugam and government leaders reject the view, arguing that the best systems are those that fit the society they govern.

"Not every aspect can be transplanted in toto across cultures, without regard to different economic, social and geostrategic situations," said the Law Minister.

It is a position he has argued vigorously in favour of in the past three months: first to a group of international lawyers meeting here in October, then the Harvard alumni in Singapore last week, and now, PAP members.

Mr Shanmugam, who is also Sec-

ond Home Affairs Minister, said the PAP's message had resonated with the older generation who experienced the turmoil of Singapore's early years.

"But the collective memory of this is not as strong among newer generations, whose viewpoints will increasingly influence the political process," he added.

Younger Singaporeans may therefore believe that the Western model of liberal democracy can be adopted without trade-offs, he said.

"Singaporeans are entitled to decide whether they want the trade-offs.

"And if the majority chooses slower development and a lower quality of life, and is willing to accept more tensions within our society in return for changes in the political system, then so be it," he said.

"But that choice must be an informed one," he added.