

# US-style media 'could do great harm to Singapore'

Racial and religious fault lines can be easily exploited, minister says

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NEW YORK: With its small population and short history, Singapore cannot withstand - nor is it prepared to accept - the possible harmful consequences of having its media become like the American press, said Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam.

The US media has a wider and freer role than the press in most other countries. But American society, being large, rich and stable, is strong enough to endure the potential damage of having a media that does not always live up to its ide-

als of being judicious, fair and independent, he said.

Mr Shanmugam drew these comparisons in a speech outlining Singapore's perspective on the role of the media at Columbia University on Thursday.

The US, he told the audience at a university forum on A Free Press for a Global Society, "has in-built stability".

"There can be fringe lunatic behaviour, but mainstream Americans are sensible and rational, and extremist sentiment will not threaten the very fabric of society," he noted.

In many developing societies, however, the glue holding society together is not as strong and "these societies can easily rupture along tribal, ethnic and religious lines," he said.

In Singapore's case, racial and religious fault lines can be easily exploited.

Given these differences, Mr Shanmugam concluded that what works for the



## Lax libel laws end up dumbing down debate into personal attacks: Shanmugam

MR K. SHANMUGAM spoke more on Singapore in a short question-and-answer session following his speech:

### ■ Why Singapore has tough libel laws

"The reasons that are pushed usually for the press having greater privilege is that it helps in the democratic debate, but I ask you, how does it help?"

The chilling effect as a result of having these defamation laws is that people may be tempted not to enter into the debate. But what about the opposite effect? First, you dumb down the debate, then it descends into a series of personal attacks, and third, serious people may well ask themselves, do I really want to get involved in the political process?

There is no reason why a personal

reputation should not be protected any less than private property, which you protect very rigorously."

### ■ Why Singapore will not move to an American-style media

"We are paranoid about whether we will continue to survive... you just look at the map and you look at history, how many city states have survived for any length of time?"

We never take our survival for granted. We know that when we do take it for granted, we gamble with the lives of our people and no responsible government will do that.

Are we prepared in Singapore to have that kind of media exchange? Does the fact that we have developed mean that our society is mature enough to accept some of the risks that will come?"

US - its media and American-style democracy - may not be easily transposed elsewhere.

"The US system will impose costs which a large, rich country like the US can afford; the cost is too high for some of us," he said.

Singapore's view of the media is that it should be a neutral medium for conveying news. It should not enter the political fray, be a political actor, or campaign for or against a policy position.

Mr Shanmugam acknowledged that such a view often gets negative attention from the international press, but he noted that not all the criticism is objective.

Turning to the question of whether Singapore should adopt an American-style media now that it is a developed nation, Mr Shanmugam said Singapore "should stick to what has worked for us."

Again, he compared the differing views of the media in the US and Singapore.

In the US, the media is widely seen as essential for the proper functioning of the democratic process, and the prevailing view is that the risk of having a free and influential press is a price worth paying. Americans also see the risk of their media being shut out from dealing with legitimate issues - thereby weakening US de-

mocracy - as the greater harm, Mr Shanmugam observed.

Singapore, on the other hand, may have reached a certain level of development, he noted, but "we are paranoid about whether we will continue to survive".

"We never take our survival for granted. We know that when we do take it for granted, we gamble with the lives of our people," he said. "No responsible government will do that."

Not surprisingly, Mr Shanmugam's 45-minute speech drew its share of opposition.

Mr Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, told The Straits Times that the minister had presented a robust defence of Singapore's press policies.

But he said he strongly disagreed with Mr Shanmugam's suggestions that Singapore's unique history gave the country standing to flout what he said were international standards.

He said: "Singapore is proud of its role in the world economy and has become a global centre for business and trade. The country should also embrace international standards for freedom of expression and the press and reform its punitive libel laws."

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## West's coverage of China 'ignores bigger picture'

WESTERN media coverage of China's human rights record is often biased and lacking in perspective, says Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam.

Among other things, the Western media appears to focus on one facet of development - human rights - but ignores the bigger picture, he indicated.

"The media... could do more to recognise the true extent of China's astonishing achievements, and ask themselves: Is it really clear that the prescriptions being

offered would help China in its continued development? Do we not think that the Chinese leaders know what is good for their country?"

In his speech at Columbia University, Mr Shanmugam cited China's rapid progress to back his point.

Once among the world's poorest countries, China has lifted several hundred million people - more than the total US population of 310 million - out of poverty. It has also become the world's second larg-

est economy after the US, manned by a talented population that is motivated to turn China into a greater power.

It also has an effective leadership succession system that ensures the best reach the top to govern.

China's leaders, noted Mr Shanmugam, have said that Western-style liberal democracy or media would just hinder the country's growth.

"The rest of the world will do well to

understand the issues China faces, the results it has achieved and its perspectives, before offering criticisms and prescriptions," said the Singapore minister.

"It would be quite unfair to give prominence to one facet, the human rights record, as defined by the liberal democracies, without considering the whole picture - the real human rights record - which is the continued upliftment of millions of people."

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