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S'pore can preserve its clean image: Shanmugam

By Zakir Hussain

LAW Minister K. Shanmugam is confident that Singapore can preserve its clean image despite a rise in the number of immigrants and the opening of the integrated resorts next year.

In its favour are four factors that have played a key role in the country's fight against corruption in the past 50 years. They are: Tough laws, a culture of integrity, stringent enforcement of the law, including on top politicians, and good, clean pay for ministers and civil servants.

'There is nothing inherently superior about Singaporeans or their DNA that makes us less corrupt,' he told about 200 academics, business leaders and officials from the region yesterday.

Mr Shanmugam was responding to Mr V.K. Rajan of real estate company Chesterton Suntec during a dialogue at a conference on governance and anti-corruption.

Mr Rajan had observed that some immigrants' attitude towards corruption was not as uncompromising as that of locals, and asked how the country could guard against an erosion of this value.

Mr Shanmugam, who is also Second Home Affairs Minister, said they will adapt to Singapore's robust anti-corruption framework.

This framework also gives him confidence the graft situation will not be affected by casinos here, a concern of another participant.

Earlier, in his speech, he noted that when the People's Action Party came to power 50 years ago, it made a firm commitment to wipe out corruption.

Although it has largely succeeded, this will always be a work in progress because of innate nature and temptation, he said.

Of the four factors, the more controversial is the policy of paying ministers, judges and senior civil servants salaries benchmarked to market pay. This is to attract the best and reduce temptations of office and power.

He acknowledged the policy was politically unpopular. But Singapore preferred the approach of paying clean wages, with no extra allowances for cars, children's education or vacations.

The minister also explained why the Government was against political lobbying. 'Assume you have powerful lobbies, and they can channel monies to lawmakers - can that affect decision-making?'

Commissioner Teresita Baltazar, a senior Philippine anti-graft official, asked Mr Shanmugam what would be his advice for a developing country with very limited resources to pay 'astronomical salaries' to officials.

Her country loses 20 per cent of its budget to graft, she added.

Mr Shanmugam replied that 'if you look at the true cost of corruption...the 'astronomical salaries' would pale in comparison with what the ministers and civil servants are worth'.

'The real problem is not the salaries. The real problem is politics. The people in power play a game of hypocrisy. We prefer to be direct.

'The game of hypocrisy is, 'Well, you know, we are all doing sacrifice. We collect US\$100 a month for our salary because we are doing this for the greater public good, and, meanwhile, I have bank accounts with \$2 million'.

'So it's a charade, and everybody knows it's a charade. How much

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longer do you want to carry on with it?" he added to applause.

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