

Singapore's long-term demographic needs is biggest challenge: Shanmugam

By S Ramesh

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Singapore's Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said dealing with the country's long-term demographic needs is the biggest challenge facing the country in the next 20 to 30 years.



Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam (AFP/File/Matt Rourke)

SINGAPORE: Singapore's Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said dealing with the country's long-term demographic needs is the biggest challenge facing the country in the next 20 to 30 years.

He was speaking to students at the second SMU Ministerial Forum on Wednesday.

Mr Shanmugam said that by 2030, there would be some 900,000 seniors in Singapore and the number of working adults supporting the senior population would go down.

If no action is taken to deal with this challenge, the minister cautioned that Singapore may end up being the slowest-growing country in the fastest-growing region.

He said slow economic growth would also have an impact on jobs as the best and the brightest in the country may gravitate out.

Nearly 200 students attended the forum.



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Mr Shanmugam said: "So declining working population, substantially increasing costs, those are the two trajectories that we face up to in the next 18 years, 20 years. Would any government in the world worry about what is going to happen in 2030? No. Most governments would worry about staying in power the next year and (if they) can win the next elections. But the way we deal in Singapore is we see ourselves as being responsible not just for the next five years but for the next 20, 30 years."

Would Singaporeans be jailed if they organised protests at Hong Lim Park?

That was a question posed to Mr Shanmugam by a student during the forum.

Mr Shanmugam replied: "There are no laws prohibiting you from protesting. If you want to go out and carry a placard and do a mass protest, go to Hong Lim Park.

"But if you want to say something on politics, express yourself at forums and blogs and write to the media what you can't say.

"If you felt like talking about migrant issues or foreign workers' wages or talking about immigration or the White Paper or SMU or government's education's policies -- anything -- there is no law that prohibits it. Nor would you go to jail. Nor has someone gone to jail for it."

However, Mr Shanmugam emphasised that certain topics are off limits.

He stressed, "If you say all Muslims are terrorists, if you say in the pursuit of your freedom of speech you are going to burn the Quran like what they did in the US, yes, you would go to jail.

"So you keep out of race and religion and you are fine."

The two-hour forum saw Mr Shanmugam engage the students on a whole host of issues including several topics on ASEAN and its economic community target of 2015.

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