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Singaporeans speak their minds at Washington conference on politics

"IS politics coming back to Singapore?" asked the headline of a Straits Times report filed from the United States by the newspaper's American correspondent last week.

Zuraidah Ibrahim's report stated that a conference in Washington to discuss "Singapore's future challenges" revealed unexpected candour among Singaporean participants on the state of affairs in the republic.

"Except for two ministers and a couple of civil servants who spoke up in defence of the Government, everyone else appeared open, frank and at many points critical," she said.

Voicing the notion that may have been on the minds of many in the island and, indeed, in the region, she asked if Singaporeans can expect to be able to speak their minds from now on.

Will open debate be allowed on the island known for its people who are generally tight-lipped when it comes to anything controversial, especially politics?

The critical tenor of the conference piqued Zuraidah's interest to the point that she felt it showed the "Americans that Singaporeans are mature about their politics".

"As for the Singaporeans in the audience, the discussions generated a couple of noteworthy points. One senses that, at least outside the Government, an elite consensus is solidifying on the need for greater political openness," she opined, qualifying that "a conference does not a consensus make..."

Politics seems to be all pervasive, judging from the Straits Times' reporting of the Asian Games.

According to a story in last Tuesday's edition with the headline "Don't lose to S'pore, KL tells athletes", a senior sports official in Malaysia allegedly told Malaysian sportsmen to make sure they beat Singapore in the medal tally.

The newspaper alluded to a Malay Mail report in Kuala Lumpur which allegedly quoted National Sports Council director-general Datuk Mazlan Ahmad as saying that the athletes should win for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Straits Times also touched on the Singapore economy midweek, saying that it appeared to be down "but it is certainly not out".

This was the reassurance from Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to Singaporeans. He added that the republic's economic recovery would hinge on its competitive advantage.

Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, as expected, endorsed the Prime Minister's stand and stated that no one should over-react to statistical indicators of the state of affairs of the Singapore economy.

Calling the figures not "totally reliable", he said the official growth forecast for the year of three to four per cent remained unchanged.

"I think we maintain an even keel, and we should expect these fluctuations. I mean, we are in a volatile environment and you cannot reach for offbudget measures and put your hand in the pocket every time you feel a drop of rain, it's not possible," he was reported as saying.

Meanwhile, Singapore is helping in Afghanistan's recovery by teaching civil servants in the wartorn nation how to run a modern and efficient civil service.

At the end of this year, 23 Afghan civil servants will arrive in

Singapore for English training before proceeding to Britain for courses in public administration and economics.