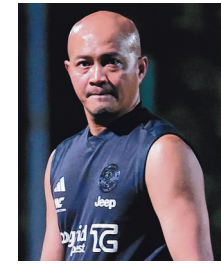


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Iswaran convicted, likely to face jail time

- Ex-minister pleads guilty to 5 charges
- Prosecution seeks 6 to 7 months' jail; defence seeks no more than 8 weeks
- Out on bail; sentencing set for Oct 3

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and **Christine Tan**

On what was to be the first day of a highly anticipated trial in which he aimed to clear his name, former transport minister S. Iswaran was convicted on Sept 24 after he pleaded guilty to five of the 35 charges he faced.

Events took an unexpected turn after the prosecution agreed to amend two corruption charges to less serious charges of obtaining valuable items as a public servant.

Iswaran, 62, admitted to obtaining valuable items worth more than \$400,000 in total from Formula One (F1) race promoter Singapore GP's chairman Ong Beng Seng and Mr David Lum Kok Seng, managing director of mainboard-listed construction company Lum Chang Holdings.

He has paid back more than \$380,000 to the state and will forfeit the items he received.

The prosecution, represented by Deputy Attorney-General Tai Wei Shyong, pressed for six to seven months' jail for Iswaran.

Mr Tai argued that as Iswaran was a minister for 12 years, his acts have had significant impact on the reputation of the Singapore Government, which is well known for its commitment to integrity.

He said that if public servants could accept substantial gifts in such a situation, public confidence in the integrity of government would be undermined.

"Not punishing such acts would send a signal that such acts are tolerated," he said.

But Iswaran's lawyer, Senior Counsel Davinder Singh, argued that the former minister should serve no more than eight weeks in jail.

Mr Singh said there was nothing to suggest that his client's loyalty and duties to the Government were compromised.

In response, Mr Tai contended that it was important for the court to set the "correct marker" on the punishment to be meted out.

Justice Vincent Hoong said he would take time to further consider the arguments, and that he would give his decision on the sentence on Oct 3.

Iswaran had pleaded guilty to four charges of obtaining valuable items as a public servant, an offence under Section 165 of the Penal Code. Another 30 charges will be taken into consideration for sentencing.



Former transport minister S. Iswaran leaving the Supreme Court on Sept 24. Events on what was to be the first day of a trial where he hoped to clear his name took an unexpected turn after the prosecution agreed to amend two corruption charges to less serious ones of obtaining valuable items as a public servant. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

He is the first person to be convicted of the offence since Singapore's independence.

Section 165 of the Penal Code makes it an offence for a public servant to accept or obtain anything of value, for free or for inadequate payment, from anyone with whom he is involved in an official capacity.

Iswaran also pleaded guilty to a fifth charge of obstructing the course of justice, for making payment of \$5,700 for a business-class flight he had taken from Doha to Singapore in 2022 at Mr Ong's expense.

Setting out how this trip came about, Mr Tai told the court that on Dec 6, 2022, Mr Ong had asked Iswaran if he would like to join him on a trip to Qatar.

Mr Ong told Iswaran he would be travelling on his private jet, and the former minister would be going as his guest. The billionaire hotelier added that he would take care of all of Iswaran's expenses, including hotel accommodation.

Iswaran accepted the invitation and applied for urgent personal leave.

On Dec 10, 2022, he travelled to Doha on Mr Ong's private jet. The value of the flight was more than \$10,000, said the prosecutor.

Upon reaching Doha, Iswaran checked into Four Seasons Hotel Doha, and the value of one night at the hotel was over \$4,000.

Iswaran then flew back to Singapore on a business-class flight that cost \$5,700, which was paid for by Singapore GP on Mr Ong's instructions.

In May 2023, while the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau was probing a separate matter relating to Mr Ong's associates, investigators came across the flight manifest of the flight to Doha.

After learning that the flight manifest had been seized, Iswaran asked Mr Ong to bill him for the expenses related to the Doha trip. He issued a cheque for \$5,700 to Singapore GP for the commercial flight.

Iswaran also admitted obtaining premium tickets to the 2017 Singapore F1 Grand Prix, with a value of \$42,265.

The court was told that Iswaran had told Singapore GP deputy

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chairman Colin Syn that he required 10 Green Room tickets for the Singapore F1 Grand Prix in 2017.

The Green Room is a hospitality suite that offers a premium experience to enjoy the race. Each ticket is worth over \$4,000.

Iswaran then gave these tickets to his friends and family to attend the race without paying for the tickets.

Iswaran also obtained a Brompton T Line bicycle worth more than \$7,900 from Mr Lum in 2022 as a present for his 60th birthday.

In November 2021, Iswaran asked Mr Lum to help him source whisky and red wine after sending him a screenshot of a bottle of Gor-

don & MacPhail Caol Ila whisky.

In January 2022, Mr Lum arranged for 14 bottles of alcohol to be delivered to Iswaran.

In relation to these Section 165 offences, Mr Tai said the facts showed that Iswaran was more than a passive acceptor of the gifts in question.

In mitigation, Iswaran's lawyer, Mr Singh, said Iswaran has recognised that he was wrong to have accepted the items from Mr Ong and Mr Lum.

Mr Singh, who addressed the court for more than two hours, said the items were given in the context of his friendship with Mr Ong and Mr Lum.

But Mr Tai said that friendship is neither a defence nor a mitigating factor to the charges under Section 165.

"The closer the social relationship, the more important it is for public servants to avoid taking gifts," he said.

Mr Singh also argued that there were no losses suffered by the gift givers.

Referring to Iswaran's trip to Doha on Mr Ong's private jet, Mr

Singh said the chairman of the World Cup had invited Mr Ong to watch the quarter-finals in 2022, and Iswaran was invited on the trip.

Iswaran had considered the trip an opportunity to learn how a city like Doha staged and organised a world event, Mr Singh said.

Mr Ong had already made arrangements for the private jet, added Mr Singh, and the cost would have been incurred regardless of whether Iswaran was on board.

As for the F1 tickets, Mr Singh said they were not for sale to begin with, so there was no loss. He added that Iswaran distributed the tickets to others, so they could enjoy the race and promote it.

But Mr Tai also said the fact that the giver did not suffer a loss was not a mitigating factor.

"We reject any submissions that there was no harm or minimal harm. Any offence under this Section 165 damages the Government's interest," he said.

At one point, Mr Tai said that he wanted to clarify that the charges were amended, but Iswaran was not acquitted of corruption.

Mr Singh then objected, saying that he never suggested that there was an acquittal.

The two then got into an extended exchange, with Mr Singh raising his voice at certain points.

But Justice Hoong said it was "pointless" to go into an argument on why the charges were amended, which was not relevant for sentencing.

In a statement to the media, the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) said that in deciding whether to amend the charge, it considered the "litigation risks" involved in proving the corruption charges beyond a reasonable doubt at trial.

The statement said that given that there are two primary parties to the transactions, both parties would have an interest in denying corruption in the transactions.

The AGC added that it will take a decision in respect of Mr Ong soon.

After the hearing, Iswaran spoke to reporters outside the Supreme Court building.

He said: "As you know, my lawyers have stated the position clearly, and as you're well aware, the matter is now sub judice, so it's not appropriate for me to say anything more."

"I just want to thank all of you for coming, and let's see how it goes."

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