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PM Wong stresses need to act to keep Govt clean, free from corruption

Goh Yan Han
Political Correspondent

While “disappointed and saddened” at the way former transport minister S. Iswaran’s political career had ended, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said it is his team’s duty to act when necessary to ensure Singapore’s system of government and politics always stay clean and free from corruption.

“We will do what is right by Singapore and Singaporeans, regardless of the political costs or the personal pain we feel when a colleague and friend has been jailed,” he said in a statement on Oct 3 after Iswaran was sentenced to 12 months’ jail.

PM Wong said those entrusted with public service must uphold the highest standards of integrity, and their conduct must be beyond

reproach.

“This is absolutely vital and non-negotiable,” he added.

Iswaran had earlier pleaded guilty to four charges of obtaining valuable items as a public servant under Section 165 of the Penal Code from Formula One race promoter Singapore GP’s chairman, Mr Ong Beng Seng, and Mr David Lum, managing director of mainboard-listed construction company Lum Chang Holdings.

He also admitted to a fifth charge of obstructing the course of justice.

Section 165 deals specifically with bribery and other forms of corrupt practices involving public servants, PM Wong noted.

He reiterated what Justice Vincent Hoong had said in sentencing Iswaran – that the essence of the offence under Section 165 was the damage to the trust in, and the integrity of, public institutions, stemming from the perception that

public servants may be cultivated by offers of valuable items from interested individuals.

The more senior the public servant, the higher would be the culpability and the greater the impact on the public interest, the judge had said.

PM Wong acknowledged Iswaran’s significant contributions as an MP for more than 25 years and as a minister in the Ministry of Communications and Information, Ministry of Trade and Industry, and Ministry of Transport, but said these do not right his wrong.

“As painful as it is to act against a colleague and friend, it is our duty to do so when necessary,” said the Prime Minister.

No political system is immune from human frailties, he noted.

“However stringently we act against corruption, from time to time, some individuals will be tempted and will go astray.

HIGH STANDARDS EXPECTED

As painful as it is to act against a colleague and friend, it is our duty to do so when necessary. Our system of government and politics must always stay clean and free from corruption. Those entrusted with public service must uphold the highest standards of integrity, and their conduct must be beyond reproach.



PRIME MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG

“In Singapore, they must expect their actions sooner or later to come to light, whereupon they will be held to account,” said PM Wong.

This was what happened in Iswaran’s case, he said.

The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) had come

across information that implicated Iswaran while investigating a separate matter, and brought the matter to the attention of then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Mr Lee immediately gave his concurrence for CPIB to commence formal investigations,

which the agency pursued thoroughly and proactively, PM Wong said.

The public prosecutor assessed the findings independently and decided to charge Iswaran.

Iswaran then resigned as a minister, MP and member of the People’s Action Party.

PM Wong said Singapore’s system ensures that public officers are held accountable, and that no one is beyond scrutiny or above the law.

“My team and I will continue to uphold the highest standards of integrity and propriety,” he said.

“The integrity of the Singapore system and the tone of our society depends critically on the senior political leadership remaining clean and incorruptible, and unflinching in acting against corruption wherever it is discovered.”

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Iswaran sentenced to 12 months in prison

Punishment almost double the jail time prosecution had sought; he has to surrender himself on Oct 7

Nadine Chua,
Wong Shiying
and **Andrew Wong**

Former transport minister S. Iswaran was handed a 12-month jail term on Oct 3 in a landmark case that saw, for the first time, a former Cabinet minister being sentenced.

The punishment was almost double the six to seven months’ jail the prosecution had sought.

Iswaran had on Sept 24 pleaded guilty to five charges – four for obtaining valuable items as a public servant from Mr Ong Beng Seng, chairman of Formula One race promoter Singapore GP, and Mr David Lum, managing director of construction company Lum Chang Holdings.

The fifth charge was for obstructing the course of justice by making payment of \$5,700 for a business-class flight he had taken from Doha to Singapore in 2022 at Mr Ong’s expense.

Meting out the sentence, Justice Vincent Hoong said what the prosecution and defence had asked for were “manifestly inadequate”. Iswaran’s lawyers had sought not more than eight weeks’ jail.

Gasps were heard in the courtroom when the judge said this. Iswaran’s wife, Ms Kay Mary Taylor, shook her head.

Justice Hoong emphasised that trust and confidence in public institutions are the bedrock of effective governance.

“This can all too easily be undermined by a public servant who falls below standards of integrity and accountability,” he said.

The higher the office held by the offender as a public servant, the higher his level of culpability, the judge added.

“Holders of high office ordinarily wield a greater degree of potential influence over significant business transactions or proceedings and have a larger resultant impact on the public interest,” he said.

Such individuals set the tone for public servants in conducting themselves to high standards of integrity, and they must avoid any perception that they are susceptible to influence by financial bene-



Former transport minister S. Iswaran leaving court on Oct 3. He was handed a 12-month jail term for obtaining valuable items as a public servant and obstructing the course of justice. Analysts said his sentence sends a strong signal that there is no compromise when it comes to conduct and integrity. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

fits, he added.

“Persons who accept appointments to high office take on the heavy responsibilities of their office along with the associated power and status, and should generally be regarded as having acted with greater culpability in abusing their position to obtain valuable gifts,” said Justice Hoong.

The judge also noted that an offender’s awareness that the giver was motivated by a desire to cultivate his goodwill and loyalty would be a relevant factor in sentencing.

As Justice Hoong addressed the court, Iswaran looked down and took notes.

Turning to the charges involving Mr Ong, the judge said Iswaran abused his position by obtaining

gifts from Mr Ong despite knowing that the Singapore GP chairman had close connection to his official duties.

Mr Ong will be charged on Oct 4 with abetting a public servant in obtaining valuables and for obstructing the course of justice.

The judge noted that Iswaran’s culpability cannot be considered low, given his standing as a minister.

He said he was not persuaded by the defence’s argument that Mr Ong would have incurred the cost of the private jet flight regardless of whether Iswaran had accompanied him.

Iswaran acted with deliberation in requesting valuable items and taking urgent personal leave for

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the trip to Doha, allowing himself to enjoy the all-expenses-paid trip with only four days’ prior notice, said Justice Hoong.

“I am unable to accept that the absence of financial detriment to the giver is a mitigating factor. The giver’s voluntary provision of the valuable item is not a mitigating factor because it does not reduce the offender’s culpability or the resultant damage to public confidence in public institutions,” he said.

The judge added that it was significant that Iswaran had made public statements asserting his innocence.

In a letter in January to then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Iswaran rejected the charges and said he was innocent and believed he would be acquitted, said Justice Hoong.

“Thus, I have considerable difficulty accepting that these acts were indicative of the accused’s remorse and desire to make reparations,” he added.

Iswaran’s trial was due to begin on Sept 24. When the hearing began, the prosecution decided not to proceed with the two corruption charges, and amended them to charges of obtaining valuable

items as a public servant.

The former minister pleaded guilty to five charges, with another 30 charges taken into consideration during sentencing.

Justice Hoong said the charges taken into consideration revealed the scale, extent and repetition of Iswaran’s offending over a significant duration of time.

Iswaran, who admitted to obtaining valuable items worth more than \$400,000 in total from Mr Ong and Mr Lum, has paid back more than \$380,000 to the state and will forfeit the items he received.

“The harm done to the public interest, in the form of damage to trust and confidence in public institutions, is unlikely to be adequately remedied by these actions,” Justice Hoong said.

Iswaran’s lawyer, Senior Counsel Davinder Singh, asked for his client’s sentence to commence on Oct 7.

The former minister is to surrender himself at 4pm on Oct 7 at the State Courts.

He exited the High Court at around 11.35am, almost an hour after the 40-minute court session.

He told the media he had no comments at this point and walked to a waiting car.

Criminal lawyer Choo Si Sen, a former deputy public prosecutor, said Iswaran has 14 days to appeal against his sentence.

If he lodges an appeal, his lawyers will likely apply for bail pending appeal. Iswaran would not have to turn up at the State Courts on Oct 7 if this bail is granted, said Mr Choo.

The veteran lawyer added that the court may impose different conditions on this bail.

“In most cases, the court will increase the bail amount by up to 50 per cent since the offender has been convicted and sentenced,” he said.

Analysts said Iswaran’s sentence sends a strong signal of Singapore’s stance – that there is no compromise when it comes to conduct and integrity.

They also noted that it is not unheard of for the courts to mete out harsher punishment than what the prosecution had sought, where deemed appropriate.

Singapore Management University’s Associate Professor Eugene Tan, who teaches law, said Iswaran’s sentence showed that the court “placed a premium on maintaining the integrity of the public sector”.

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