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PM Lee: Shanmugam, Vivian have done nothing wrong

MINISTERS K Shanmugam and Vivian Balakrishnan have done nothing wrong and retain his full confidence, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, following probes by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) and Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean that uncovered no criminal wrongdoing or improper conduct by the two ministers.

There is nothing wrong with ministers renting the black-and-white bungalows from the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), provided it is properly done, and all procedures are followed, he added.

Addressing the House in Parliament on Monday (Jul 3) following four ministerial statements on the Ridout Road issue, PM Lee said min-

isters in Singapore are paid a clean wage – “realistic, competitive, but clean wage”.

“We don’t get perks. There’s no official house to live in. You get a salary, it’s for you to judge what you need it for, for your lives. Save it, give it away, spend it, put it in a house, travel, whatever,” he said. “Therefore, where ministers decide to live, whether they want to rent, whether they want to buy, these are personal choices.”

When he heard that Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan had rented the black-and-white bungalows at Ridout Road, PM Lee said his assessment, without going into it in depth, was

that he did not believe there was wrongdoing.

However, the issue continued to attract public interest and both ministers asked him to conduct an investigation independent of their ministries. PM Lee then decided that, “notwithstanding my confidence in them and in the system”, it would be best to task the CPIB to conduct a formal investigation and to establish definitively if there was any corruption or wrongdoing. “The CPIB is independent. It has built up a strong reputation as an anti-corruption outfit,” he said.

Apart from the legal question of whether there was criminal conduct, PM Lee said he wanted a broader review, including on SLA’s proc-

esses, whether there was preferential treatment enjoyed by the ministers, and whether any privileged information was disclosed to them.

“As PM, my duty is not just to be satisfied that legally, there was no wrongdoing, but whether, quite apart from the law, there was any other kind of misconduct or impropriety.”

He then tasked Teo to conduct this review to complement CPIB’s investigation. He noted that some MPs had suggested on Monday that Teo was not sufficiently independent to conduct the investigation.

He said he viewed it differently. For corruption and wrongdoing, there is an independent process in place, such as the CPIB investigation

and referral to the Attorney-General’s Chambers. “But ethics and standards of propriety – those are the prime minister’s responsibility. I have to set the standards of what’s ethical, what’s proper,” he said. “I cannot outsource them. For example, to appoint an ethics adviser to tell me what is proper or not proper. I have to know what is proper or not. Otherwise, I shouldn’t be here.”

Addressing Workers’ Party chief Pritam Singh’s remarks on the subject, PM Lee said: “The Leader of the Opposition paid CPIB and paid the Government a compliment just now when he said, nobody is suggesting corruption on the part of the ministers.”

Singh had said earlier in the sitting: “I don’t believe anybody is making an allegation that the minister is corrupt, somebody is corrupt in the

system... Singaporeans are not making that point. I think it’s quite clear.”

He noted that Monday’s parliamentary discussion was not meant to just resolve the issues of the rentals of Ridout Road. He said: “It’s also a demonstration of how the PAP is determined to uphold the standards which it has set itself from the beginning in 1959. This government has not, and will never, tolerate any compromise or departure from the stringent standards of honesty, integrity and incorruptibility that Singaporeans expect of us.”

This is the foundation not just for the people’s trust in the PAP government, but for the integrity and good functioning of Singapore’s political system, said PM Lee. “This is my commitment and the PAP government’s unwavering commitment to Singaporeans.” THE STRAITS TIMES