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## **Lee Kuan Yew: The ‘Engine’ That Was ‘Too Big for the Boat’**

*By Kumar Ramakrishna*

### **Synopsis**

*Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s renowned intellectual, moral and political strengths played a major role in Singapore’s rise from Third World to First in one generation. Fair-minded Singaporeans are unlikely to forget his achievements.*

### **Commentary**

NOT LONG after the fall of Soviet Communism more than two decades ago now, the American Soviet specialist Jerry Hough created a stir when he declared that “Singapore had actually won the Cold War”. In a sense Hough was paying a compliment to the vision of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister.

The emerging orthodoxy by the early 1990s was that the US-led Western bloc, organised according to the principles of liberal democracy and market capitalism, had trumped Soviet-style centralised political and economic planning. This was what had won the Cold War, as popularised by Francis Fukuyama’s famous “End of History” thesis. Hough’s claim about Singapore was thus startling because while Singapore had adopted market principles in economic organisation, its political system was not liberal democratic in a textbook sense, but rather a hybrid one. Then and now Singapore’s system of governance prioritised order as the basis for the rule of law. Hough was thus implying that there was also a Singapore model of governance that deserved wide appreciation.

### **Lee’s view of order and rule of law**

Over the years Lee had had many detractors who chided his failure to adopt textbook liberal democratic methods in governing Singapore. They suggested that by so doing he was undermining the rule of law in Singapore. The critics totally misunderstood Lee’s perspective however. Lee saw the rule of law as utterly integral to the successful political and economic development of Singapore. However Lee’s view of the rule of law was one that was subordinate to Singapore’s needs and not vice versa. He rejected an un-contextualized, abstract conception of the law. In particular, the experiences of fighting the Communists in the 1950s and 1960s engendered in Lee the conviction that order must always precede and establish the basis for legal frameworks.

In a speech to the University of Singapore Law Society on 18 January 1962, Lee argued that while in “a settled and established society, law appears to be a precursor of order” in emerging ones wracked by violence and subversion the reverse was often the case: “without order, the operation of law is impossible”. At the time of this speech the Cold War was at its height and Singapore and Malaya were very much a frontline in the ideological and geopolitical conflict between the Eastern and Western blocs.

It was with this wider backdrop in mind that Lee added that the “realities of the sociological and political milieu in Malaya and of the world of 1962 are that if you allow these shibboleths of ‘law and order’ to be uttered out of context” and without reference to “the actual social and political conditions we are in”, disaster may strike, simply because in “the last analysis if the state disintegrates then the rules of all laws must vanish”.

### **Lee’s life mission: Fighting society’s entropy**

Years later, an insightful journalist suggested that to understand Lee Kuan Yew’s approach to governance, one must first appreciate how he had devoted his entire political career to fighting the “entropy” – the decay – of a society and its politics. This was something he had had first-hand experience with during his twilight struggles with the powerful, often violent Communist United Front in the Singapore of the 1950s and early 1960s.

For Lee, the lesson from that struggle – quite clearly the defining experience that shaped his entire outlook on politics and governance – was clear: Singapore needed order as the wellspring of everything else – including especially the economic security that a polyglot, immigrant, multiracial society needed as an initial basis for glueing its disparate elements together.

Lee’s ability to instinctively grasp - through the “fog” of both the internal political upheaval of the struggle with the Communists as well as the external instability of *Konfrontasi* of the 1960s – that political order and economic growth were the sine qua non of Singapore’s survival, was important. It was arguably one aspect of what the renowned 19th century Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz called *coup d’oeil* – “the rapid discovery of a truth which to the ordinary mind is either not visible at all or only becomes so after long examination and reflection”. Lee’s uncanny ability to dissect a complex situation under stress and chart a path forward was a measure of his *coup d’oeil*.

But there is another aspect to *coup d’oeil* that is equally important and which Lee possessed in abundance: the “resolution” to overcome “the torments of doubt” and follow through despite the uncertainties expressed by all and sundry. In this respect, many commentators have noted Lee’s forcefulness in pursuing courses of action that were often seen as controversial and unpopular. Clear examples are the restrictions on foreign newspapers deemed to have interfered in Singapore’s domestic politics; unfettered religious proselytisation; family planning policies that some deemed promoted elitism; and of course defamation suits against those opponents whom Lee felt had impugned the political credibility he needed to govern optimally.

### **Singapore’s political viability paramount**

What arguably tied all these various elements together, regardless of one’s sentiments about them, was one overriding consideration: Singapore’s continued political viability and prosperity. Lee consistently counseled resolute, eternal vigilance. This was the only stance he believed made sense in light of how the globalised nature of Singapore’s economy and polity rendered the country inescapably exposed to global and regional perturbations.

A third element of the *coup d’oeil* that Lee appeared to possess was “presence of mind” – or the innate capacity to surmount the “unexpected” and pursue one’s aim to a successful conclusion. Make no mistake: Lee could certainly be pretty Machiavellian in his machinations with his political opponents in pursuit of his agendas. In July 1965, a mere month before Separation from Malaysia, *Life* magazine – quoting an unnamed “British high official in Singapore” – somewhat inelegantly described Lee as “the most brilliant man around, albeit just a bit of a thug”.

But one must keep things in perspective: in an era when global Communism was elsewhere on the

march, the Communists in Singapore – no strangers to cheerfully employing ruses and stratagems themselves to get their way – complained that they had found Lee’s PAP a match in “methods of political chicanery”. Lee Kuan Yew was no saint and never pretended to be one – but he possessed the “presence of mind” to defeat the Communists and set Singapore on a different trajectory.

As it was said of Abraham Lincoln the day he passed away, Lee Kuan Yew himself now “belongs to the ages”. In the 1970s, a leading American politician once declared of Lee and Singapore: “The engine is too big for the boat”. Perhaps that may have been the case, but the gratitude of fair-minded Singaporeans is not likely to ever abate.

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