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Lee Kuan Yew's Legacy: A Singaporean Singapore

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

While the physical transformation of Singapore from Third World to First is well-known, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's lasting achievement was building a Singaporean nation out of its diverse people.

Commentary

WHEN MR LEE Kuan Yew visited the Central Sikh Temple on 2 November 1990, I was just a few metres away as the then Prime Minister remarked: "At the right time, my Government wants the Sikhs to have the Punjabi Language [as a Mother Tongue Language in schools]. My Government and I would be failures if we foist the Chinese language on you." That was Mr. Lee the nation builder at his best.

True to his words, one of his last acts as Prime Minister was a letter to the Sikh community indicating the Ministry of Education's willingness to accept Punjabi as a Mother Tongue Language as part of the national bilingualism policy in the context of multiculturalism. Throughout his entire political career, Lee Kuan Yew had also scrupulously kept true to this policy as he strove to build a nation out of a multi-ethnic society.

Unity in diversity

Lee Kuan Yew never feared confronting realities. One of the eternal hard truths of Singapore was its sharp fault lines along racial, religious and linguistic lines. To him it was clear that without developing a sense of unity among the populace, the island Republic would fail to takeoff politically and economically. Worse still, it faced the danger of imploding from within as experienced by similar plural societies such as Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Cyprus and Fiji.

Lee Kuan Yew never forgot the ethnic origins of Singaporeans either. He deplored the colonial policy of ethnic enclaves. British colonial policy towards a plural society was to allow people to mix and not integrate. People came together but remained separate, holding on to their respective religions, cultures, languages and orientations.

Even as an Opposition leader in the 1950s, Lee Kuan Yew realised the danger of this policy. On

becoming Prime Minister in 1959 he reversed it, creating the nation-in-making that Singapore is. The national outpouring of grief following his death signalled how far Singapore has advanced as a nation since 1959.

The question was - what type of nation should Singapore be? The realities of history, geography, demography, economic dependence and geopolitics drove Lee to carve a unique, tolerant multi-racial nation through a policy of unity in diversity.

While this sounds rational and common sense today, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was revolutionary thinking. The easy option was to create a 'Chinese nation' in Singapore. This would have been tempting as the 1950s saw the rise of Chinese chauvinism and it would have been an easy strategy. Lee opposed this.

He opted for a much tougher route of galvanising everyone into the process of building a new nation as stakeholders, requiring Singaporeans to give up something and adopt new values of peaceful coexistence in a multiracial setting. He succeeded in imbuing a sense of attachment to Singapore, which is one of Mr Lee's lasting legacies.

National integration

Lee's success in defeating the communists in Singapore was particularly important in this endeavour. The communists played upon ethnic Chinese sentiments, championing Chinese education, language and culture. Lee knew that this was divisive internally and would also give the proximate neighbours an excuse to stymie Singapore's fledgling independence.

Following the victory of his People's Action Party in the 1963 general election, after merger with Malaysia, Lee embarked on a bold experiment to transform Singapore, something that was pursued with greater vigour after independence on 9 August 1965. The crux of the experiment was aimed at creating social harmony and pursuit of policies that would promote economic growth in what was a highly divisive social terrain devoid of resources.

Many programmes were implemented to achieve these goals. The need to moderate racial, religious and linguistic demands was critical to ensure Singaporeans lived in harmony, especially after the 1964 racial riots. Ethnic, religious and linguistic identities were safeguarded to provide cultural ballast and accommodate the aspirations of a largely traditional Asian society. New national values were imbued with the principle of meritocracy determining social mobility and excellence in society.

Through subtle and robust measures, an integrated approach was adopted to transform the nation. This was undertaken through a plethora of policies in education, housing, national service, sharing of national economic wealth, job security, health care, efficient transport system, cleanliness, modern sanitation and provision of physical security. A nation emerged through good governance.

As nation-building is an emotional and psychological process, working on the 'heart-ware' was as important as hardware. It was about creating a new political consciousness. The ultimate aim was not just feeling good about Singapore but more importantly, feeling as Singaporeans. This involved a psychological mindset shift about believing in a Singaporean spirit.

LKY's concept of nationhood

The death of Lee Kuan Yew and the unison of national grief expressed was a significant national political act. It symbolised shared values that he stood for, struggled against, championed and achieved. If Singapore collapses after Lee Kuan Yew, then the founder of modern Singapore would have failed. He imbued in the people a concept of nation, a spirit of never giving up, the value of national unity and the importance of success. He made Singaporeans realise that Singapore was a 'home', not a 'hotel'.

While the physical transformation of Singapore from Third World to First is self-evident, even more fundamental is Lee's success in creating a nation from a swamp and mudflat. This is a Singapore that enshrines values of harmony, incorruptibility, equal opportunity, hard work, excellence and above all, hope for the future.

Lee Kuan Yew's dream of a great city state, unique in history and where the people are not just people of Singapore but have learnt to embrace the world, will be one of his greatest legacies.

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