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Lee Kuan Yew: The Sage and Giant from Southeast Asia

By Yusuf Wanandi

Synopsis

The late former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew may not have started warmly with Indonesia and ASEAN, but he eventually became a staunch supporter of Singapore's large neighbour based on the trust developed with Suharto, which anchored the growth of ASEAN. How will the successor generation pursue his legacy?

Commentary

SO MANY things have been said about Lee Kuan Yew. He was the founder of modern Singapore, a small transit harbour on the tip of the Malay Peninsula. Together with his colleagues such as Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam, he built Singapore from a Third World to a First World country in less than two generations.

Lee was the thinker and strategist of many Southeast Asian policies on the region and the world. On ASEAN, Lee was initially lukewarm, but Singapore now has become one of the many active members, while always leaning on the conservative side.

Lee Kuan Yew's foreign policy

On his foreign policy, he was a true realist, and that is why he wanted to see a balance of power in East Asia, and achieving that purpose meant keeping the US presence in the Western Pacific. In addition, he did his best to assist China in its human resources development by training its bureaucrats and admitting students from China into Singapore's universities. Singapore also invested substantially in China.

Singapore, after all, is a trading nation and so has to keep its relations close to China economically. Lee also watched carefully to keep relations with neighbours amicable, not only through ASEAN but also bilaterally, especially with Indonesia and Malaysia. With Indonesia, Lee managed to build a close relationship with Suharto after a frosty period of seven years, due to his rejection of Suharto's appeal for clemency for two marines who participated in combat during Sukarno's *Konfrontasi*.

Both Lee and Suharto became close as Lee was appreciative of Suharto, who dealt with him and

Singapore on an equal basis. On Suharto's part, he thought that Lee would like to help him and Indonesia. He also recognised Lee as a real partner in Southeast Asia, particularly within ASEAN. While Suharto was criticised by the Indonesian elite in the last few years of his rule, it was Lee who defended his friend and appealed to let him stay in power.

Lee's myopic view on the relationship was that it tilted too much to government-to-government relations, especially with the military.

While this might have served Singapore's interest as the role of the government is overpowering, for the Indonesian side that was considered inadequate - especially after Suharto stepped down. That is why Indonesia-Singapore relations remain limited, because Indonesia's public opinion of Singapore is still somewhat negative; so far there have been no substantial efforts on the Singaporean side to deal with and relate to the non-governmental part of Indonesia.

Lee Kuan Yew and Indonesian democracy

Singapore tends to think that it is unnecessary and does not directly serve its interests, but Indonesian democracy is real and the government can do only so much. This can become acute in the future because Singapore's investments in Indonesia have been increasing dramatically, especially in the last decade, and Singapore has become one of the big three investors in Indonesia overall.

Lee, with his sharp thinking, especially on the future of East Asia and Asia Pacific, had become the spokesperson for the region, in particular to the West, and that was indeed an important role that he played. And regarding the future strategic development of the region, no one can replace him.

I am really very fortunate to have known Lee closely during the crisis years after Suharto stepped down. He was always straight-forward in his assessments of Indonesia and Indonesia-Singapore relations, and that was his strength, which added to his credibility in the eyes of others.

People appreciated his thoughts on Indonesia and on its relations with Singapore. Sometimes he could comment on what Indonesians could not even say during the Suharto years about themselves. I learned a lot from him and will always be thankful for my guru's words and advice.

He was the sage and giant not only for Singapore but also for the region. He should be remembered as one of our Southeast Asian leaders that did so much for the region.

Lee's insights and leadership transformed Singapore into a developed nation. Now with a new generation, which has benefited from his creation of Singapore as a city-state, his ideas should be further adjusted, but that is the task of the new leadership he had already prepared for Singapore. Thank you, Mr. Lee!

Jusuf Wanandi is a vice chair on the board of trustees at the CSIS Foundation in Jakarta. This commentary first appeared in The Jakarta Post. This is part of an RSIS series on the Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew.
