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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Pandemic and Vulnerability: Lessons from Lee Kuan Yew

By Liu Enxiao

SYNOPSIS

A sovereign city state is born with vulnerability. Though the COVID-19 pandemic is magnifying this vulnerability, the wisdom of Lee Kuan Yew in beating odds faced by Singapore is still highly relevant. He has built a cohesive, non-complacent and resilient society.

COMMENTARY

MORE THAN 61 years ago, on 5 June 1959, the late Lee Kuan Yew was sworn in as Singapore's first prime minister in a nine-member Cabinet. On the fifth anniversary of his passing on 23 March 2020, three invaluable lessons from Lee Kuan Yew were recalled by Han Fook Kwang as Singapore combat the COVID-19 pandemic. That timely writing is an affectionate and meaningful way of remembering Lee Kuan Yew and his spirit.

As the novel coronavirus continues to take away human lives and destroy economies around the world, and as Singapore's leadership pursues a systematic way of overcoming the COVID-19 challenges, it is opportune to look again at Lee Kuan Yew's wisdom and foresight.

Lesson # 1: Vulnerability & the Little Dot Gift

Lee Kuan Yew was always concerned with lesson No. 1 — Singapore's vulnerability. To him, it is a reality and not a myth. Singapore, along with Monaco and Vatican City,

is one of the three city-states in the world and the only truly sovereign one. Vulnerability is a hallmark of a city state, partly because of its inherent small size.

It takes no rocket science to appreciate that Singapore is just a little red dot on the world map. At times, however, we may forget this, which warranted repeated reminders by Lee Kuan Yew until his death.

What worried Lee Kuan Yew was the potential complacency among Singaporeans. As early as in 1970, he remarked: "What I fear is complacency. When things always become better, people tend to want more for less work."

His purpose of talking about vulnerability was solely to drive out any complacency, but not to get people dispirited or demoralised. He once cautioned that "No, your job as a leader is to inspire and to galvanise, not to share your distraught thoughts. You make your people dispirited."

The 14th century Italian poet Dante once said: "Do not be afraid; our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift." Today, we should probably say: vulnerability cannot be taken from us; it is a gift. Singapore is also a gift, a gift that Lee Kuan Yew built up with so much of his life.

Lesson #2: Leadership & the World as It Is

French Nobel Prize winner for literature Romain Rolland famously pointed out that "there is only one true heroism in the world: to see the world as it is, and to love it." Lee Kuan Yew saw Singapore as it is — small, vulnerable, multi-racial, scarce in resources, but he loved it relentlessly and with his life. In his own words: "At the end of the day, what have I got? A successful Singapore. What have I given up? My life."

Singapore has defied the vulnerability and all other odds to achieve what it is today. In the process of building up Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew left abundant legacies with many words of wisdom. Two of his timeless quotes are germane as the fight against COVID-19 continues:

- *"Change is the very essence of life. The moment we cease to change, to be able to adapt, to adjust, to respond effectively to new situations, then we have begun to die";*

- *"A nation is great not by its size alone. It is the will, the cohesion, the stamina, the discipline of its people and the quality of their leaders, which ensure it an honourable place in history."*

Lesson No. 2 is on the quality of leaders. Lee Kuan Yew was passionate about this. He was quoted as saying "...but not even my worst enemy has ever accused me of being afraid to speak my mind." Speaking up is not for the sake of being popular, because he grasped that "If you want to be popular all the time, you will misgovern" and "I always tried to be correct, not politically correct."

Unlike some past public health crises, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes the Achilles heel of countries that never before think they are vulnerable. Its aftermath is yet to be seen, but some of its consequences are already emerging, such as undermining of

global supply chains, worsening geopolitical tensions and friction, and wiping out jobs in many sectors.

To beat the odds, the answer is never stop changing, never stop thinking, and never stop innovating. Leaders have to govern, offer practical ideas, and rally the people to make difficult but necessary decisions.

Singapore is small, but the nation has worked as a whole in previous crises. Singapore, as a city-state, is not an aberration, as Venice was a completely sovereign state between the ninth to late 18th century and lasted for more than 1,000 years.

Lesson #3: Working Buttons, Innovative Mindset

For lesson No. 3, a malfunctioning call button as narrated by Lee Kuan Yew provided an intriguing story. In his mind, anything that does not work must be fixed quickly. In the early years of building Singapore, the pioneering leaders had many buttons to fix and they ensured buttons were fixed with speed and quality.

Applying this to the COVID-19 crisis, there is no luxury of time; we have to take all the necessary actions to deal with any deficiency and flaw in public health coverage at each stage of the situation as more information becomes available and the required measures could be implemented.

No-one really knows what is “enough,” and how and where the virus will next attack. How to manage the shelf lives of medical goods and their storage space? It is akin to the rush-hour syndrome in transportation, where crowding is hard to manage. In this sense, prevention is better than cure.

COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis, no prefabricated buttons can work wonders. The “too-late” mindset is toxic, because the common wisdom is that “It’s never too late to mend the fence after a few sheep are lost.”

Going Forward: Reinventing New Buttons

In this fast-changing era, it is simply not enough to just maintain the buttons diligently and make sure they work regardless of rain or shine. New buttons must be created constantly because this is a time in dire need of innovation at all levels. Innovation is the key for a nation to stand out and prosper. Inventing, reinventing and making new buttons, while fixing and maintaining old ones, will be the key going forward.

Singapore has benefitted from Lee Kuan Yew’s extraordinary foundational policies and wise statesmanship. COVID-19 is another big, yet transient crisis eventually to be overcome by the people working hand-in-hand with committed leadership within and outside Singapore. The essential takeaway from this pandemic is hardship and adversity will not break the cohesive and non-complacent Singapore society.

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