

■ COMMENTARY

Will Singaporeans grow tired of the status quo?

By Tan Khee Giap

DURING an interview with the *Financial Times* on May 29, 2018, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was quoted as saying: "I think the people of Singapore, like the people in Malaysia, must be tired of having the same government, the same party since independence". It is perhaps in his character to express such a view.

Two key factors are critical for the successful development of any economy: an effective leadership supported by an efficient civil service and a sustainable budgetary process that is capable of financing strategic economic policies and social development initiatives.

Singapore has successfully transformed itself from the third to the first world within a few decades. Singapore's achievements can be attributed to the "DNA" of its public policy formulation which was pioneered by the country's old guard under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew. This "DNA" can be summarised in the following five tenets:

■ Pragmatism in public policy formulation by not relying on textbook cases is the hallmark of Singapore's unique and innovative policy initiatives. Pragmatism is more than simply being practical; it also requires strong adherence to governing with integrity and principles. The affordability of the asset-enhancing public housing scheme as well as the uniqueness of the Central Provident Fund (CPF) contribution system are examples of how pragmatism in policymaking can lead to innovation in its formulation.

■ Reinforcing Singapore's strategic location as a hub for international trade and services and projecting Singapore as a cosmopolitan city-state was the top priority during the early days of nation-building. When faced with limited financial resources after independence, priority on education was pragmatically concentrated on raising quality of teachers rather than physical expanding of schools on a large scale as compared to heavy investment to promote global economic connectivity. Positioning the country at the forefront of globalisation has been a cornerstone of Singapore's public policy and it has allowed the country to become a regional economic hub for world-class financial, aviation, maritime, logistics and telecommunication and education services.

■ A strict zero tolerance for corruption, from financial rewards to exchanging power for favours, has been the bedrock of Singapore's effective public policy formulation and its efficient implementation. The Singapore government's unflinching stance against corruption has consistently put the Republic among the least corrupt countries in the world.

■ Ensuring an inclusive society through the principle of promoting workfare instead of welfare is fundamental to Singapore's public policy formulation. It is imperative that this principle is not compromised by populist policies. Instead, programmes directed at increasing the international competitiveness and productivity of Singapore's workforce through skills training and industrial internships as well as updating the education curriculum will be more sustainable in the long run than welfare spending for the unemployed.

■ Preserving the democratic system which allows for checks and balances is core to the legitimacy of public policy formulation. For the last five decades, Singapore citizens have the right to periodically choose the government that would best serve their interests.

These five tenets have always underpinned Singapore's public policy formulation. However, in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era, it is not surprising that the articulation, communication and implementation of policy will have to take a more consultative approach by engaging in national conversations and, at times, intense debate in language that people can resonate with. Surrounding the public policy discourse, there are three serious social-economic challenges that both Singapore's leadership and public will have to deal with: alleviating worsening income disparity, improving upward social mobility and enhancing social integration by social classes, ethnicity, religion and cultural groups.

Given the growing discontent caused by the spread of globalisation, more should be done to ensure balanced and inclusive economic growth in order to reduce income inequality. While improving upward social mobility and promoting greater social integration between people from diverse backgrounds may be a daunting task, these goals are paramount, especially in a densely populated city-state.

As such, the wisdom of the new leadership will be measured by how they approach issues such as integrated housing programmes, ensuring a level playing field in education, promoting religious harmony and forging a common national identity that evolves with time.

The late Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew repeatedly reminded Singaporeans that no one owes us a living, and that the survival of Singapore hinges on how we as one united people have to constantly remake Singapore to stay relevant.

Singapore was picked to be on the world stage in hosting the historic Trump-Kim summit, which has just been smoothly and safely conducted. Even as a small state, Singapore will undoubtedly continue to be entrusted to host similar high-level meetings in the years to come as it has had successfully organised official meetings of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund.

The country's current internationally credible reputation and efficiency have been cultivated and nurtured over decades by the Singapore government under the People's Action Party (PAP). However, moving ahead, there will be a host of new social, economic and political challenges to face.

Will Singaporeans grow tired of the same ruling party? Only they can decide for themselves.

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