

Reading of Essay by Contributor

His Excellency Sajjad Ashraf

Excellency Foreign Minister Mr.K Shanmugam
Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board Mrs Elaine Ng
Prof. Tommy Koh, Special Advisor Institute of Policy Studies
Excellency Federico Palomera Guez, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps
Excellences' Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honor for me to be invited to write a chapter for the Little Red Dot and even bigger honor to be one of the only two former heads of mission asked speak at the launch of the book. Thank you once again.

If Dean Kishore Mahbubani was here and speaking he would have begun acknowledging Prof. Tommy Koh as his Guru and would have made only 3 points. Prof Tommy Koh is my Guru's Guru. And since I am associated with the LKY School I can only make 2 points and not 3 to describe Singapore. And these to describe Singapore are ...

Manicured and Choreographed

The Story of Effervescent Singapore

Sajjad Ashraf

It is extraordinary that in nearly 50 years of independence in addition to being a major financial center Singapore is a thought leader in many fields of human endeavor. The story perhaps, can never be exhaustively written.

I completed my 36-year, 9 countries and 4 continents diplomatic career in December 2008 as High Commissioner and Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in Singapore. Since then I am fortunate to be associated with distinguished institutions like Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

It is only after relinquishing my post I started discovering Singapore as an ordinary person. I have come to feel, see and to appreciate how citizen is central to planning in this country. I use public transport. I have not seen such complete integration and harmony between the residential areas, public transport and community areas like food courts, shopping blocs or work places. By raising the home ownership to over 80 percent the government made these citizens stakeholder in Singapore's prosperity. No other country does it with such passion and purpose.

The impact on arrival in Singapore is spellbinding when instead of the usual search for a garden in a city you enter, "a city in a garden." No other project than clean and green Singapore has brought richer rewards for the country, rightly says the founding father Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. "Greening is the most effective project I have launched," he adds. The environment is the foretaste of so much good to follow.

Within 3 months of my arrival as the High Commissioner in July 2004 a very senior member of Pakistan government while visiting Singapore asked me, "High Commissioner, how do you describe Singapore?" Relatively new to the place and caught off guard, I hesitatingly said: "Sir, manicured and choreographed."

Having unwittingly uttered these words describing Singapore I have intently reflected upon them. I find Singapore's success encapsulated in these two words. Real progress can only take place with synchronized action. A good choreographer is able to draw the best out of the performers. People pulling every side bring chaos and disorder in societies. Look at ballets. Look at military parades and calisthenics – the choreography and the manicured performers enthrall people. With its ambitions and achievements Singapore enthralls the world.

I pick only a few examples to explain my views.

Singapore, to me is a story of resolution and courage in pursuit of its dreams led fittingly by men with highest levels of integrity. This permeates down the people and thus becomes the benchmark on which Singapore is measured and identified. That

is how the founding fathers of this country went about crafting policies and rhythmically pursuing them.

Many countries pursue its goals but I have seen none that adopts a coherent businesslike approach of formally articulating its vision, its mission statement, setting goals and then pursuing them with vigor. These values adopted in 1989 are:

1. Nation before community and society above self;
2. Family as the basic unit of society;
3. Regard and the community support for the individual;
4. Consensus instead of contention;
5. Racial and religious harmony,

Pursuing these 5 values aligns the citizens' thoughts and then the leadership choreographs their actions gelling them into a remarkably cohesive unit. In fact, these values are the pre-requisite to survival and prosperity of the country, said Mr. George Yeo, in 1989 when he was Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs.

Look at the concept of Total Defense, which has 5 components: military defense, civil defense, economic defense, social defense and psychological defense. The emphasis is on the whole, as weakening in any one sector can lead to defeat. All must be defended in unison.

These are all encompassing thoughts. A choreographer cannot allow one misstep otherwise the performance becomes sloppy. This is how, I see the leadership here performing and taking the country to its manicured levels.

In fact the state of preparedness is part of Singapore's psyche. To me even small things like parking the car face out symbolizes Singapore's preparedness and harmony.

Gelling a nation of a country with three disparate communities – all tied culturally and emotionally to their homelands is a remarkable act of choreography.

The harmony of celebrating different cultures strikes me particularly because in comparison Pakistan started as a united nation and has yet faltered on the way. The contrast could not be greater.

These foundations of multi-racialism on which the society is built must hold going forward, maintaining Singapore's edge as a cohesive and vibrant society.

I do not know of a country that lays so much emphasis on meritocracy and leadership renewal. "My job really was to find my successors. I found them; their job is to find successors. There must be this continuous renewal ..." said Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. When I had the honor of meeting him for the first time in 2004 with a visiting Pakistani dignitary, he only sent one message to then President Musharraf – prepare for leadership change. Even change is choreographed here and successfully. This renewal nourishes the system.

No country understands better that even good policies fail unless executed honestly and with passion. How the leadership creates an environment where top brains are wooed to join public service, provide them full backing, compensate them adequately, makes Singapore unique and special, to me.

Meritocracy runs not only for selecting the best in bureaucracy but also in selection of political leadership and it shows in the meticulous care with which the process is implemented.

It is the emphasis on human development associated with leadership renewal that allows Singapore a role larger than its size. This is necessary to maintain Singapore's edge in governance, economy and thought leadership.

One of the most striking policy successes in my view is the way Singapore converted its hinterland into a boundless opportunity for expansion and development. After opening doors to multi-national corporations, Singapore has never looked back. It is a lesson to the world that size is no disadvantage if a country chooses correct growth strategies.

Linking education with economic needs creates a purpose for learning. And now having reached a level of excellence Singapore is sharing its success in governance through the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

I am also impressed how Singapore has used its location sandwiched between two big neighbors to its advantage. From a state of near hostility Singapore's neighbors now look towards Singapore for shared prosperity.

It is these deft moves manicured to a level where a country of just 5 million residents is now the 17th biggest economy in the world.

Singapore story can only be felt by living amongst its people, by sensing its effervescency, self-confidence and its evolving identity. I have the good fortune of seeing it from either side – an outsider and now also as an ordinary insider.

Singapore is indeed choreography and manicure in its finest form.

I call it a marvel of human engineering.

Majulah Singapura – Onwards Singapore