

## Lee Kuan Yew leaves a legacy of authoritarian pragmatism

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For some, Lee Kuan Yew's death marks the passing of a ruthless tyrant. For others, it is the tireless leader's final reward.

Over the past few days I feel like I've grown quite close to the man. I've read his memoirs, a couple of his interviews, and re-read Carl Trocki's account of Singapore's history. But Lee is still an enigma to me. I doubt I will ever figure him out. "They think they know me, but they only know the public me," he said in an interview in 2009. Lee was probably right and I imagine he said it with a tinge of sadness.

Of all the benevolent dictators in history, none deserve the title more than Mr Lee. For 31 years, he ruled as prime minister of Singapore, and for two more decades, he held a key position in the cabinet. Firmly entrenched, and with a free hand, Lee moulded Singapore in his own image and made it what it is today – a prosperous city-state with an intensely pragmatic people under the spell of a peculiar brand of "soft" authoritarianism.

Singapore is half the size of London but with two-thirds its population. It has an efficient bureaucracy, a corruption-free government, clean air, safe streets, excellent schools, affordable healthcare, high home ownership, and the third highest per capita income in the world. By most standards, Singapore is the perfect place to do business, a lovely place to call home. And we have Lee to thank for much of that.

But Singapore is also home to a rigid pragmatism, an unyielding commitment to material well-being that is cloaked in anti-ideological garb. And Lee is its foremost practitioner. He is the master and the teacher. His favourite question was not "is this right?", but "so what?". What mattered was whether his plan would work – whether it would ensure Singapore's survival and guarantee its success.

The Cambridge-educated scholar wasn't interested in heady concepts of liberty. As a lawyer he knew them well, but as a British subject, and later during the Japanese occupation, he had learnt an invaluable lesson – you can't fill stomachs with liberty, but you can chew up those who use it to oppose you. "I learned how to govern, how you dominate the people, as the British did, and how the Japanese used their power," he said.

And so he arbitrarily detained hundreds of alleged communists, chauvinists and extremists over the years using the Internal Security Act, a holdover from Singapore's colonial past. It was detention without trial so concrete evidence wasn't necessary. All you needed was a firm conviction that the country was under siege and the strategic brilliance to outmanoeuvre the enemy.

It was no coincidence that many of these alleged communists were Lee's political opponents. In 1963, more than 100 opposition politicians and union leaders were deemed a threat to national security and arbitrarily detained, crippling the Barisan Socialis, the biggest political threat to Lee's People's Action Party (PAP). By 1968, the PAP had won 58 out of 58 seats in parliament. The opposition never recovered and the PAP has never lost an election since.

Despite these methods, it is hard to disagree with Tom Plates, an American journalist who interviewed Lee in 2009. “We in the west may quarrel with the way [Singapore’s prosperity] was achieved, but the achievement somehow seems to dwarf the critique,” he said.

Fast forward to 2015, and the PAP continues to abide by the principles left behind by its indomitable leader. In 2005, Cherian George, director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship, described the PAP’s authoritarianism as a form of “calibrated coercion”, an intelligent way to maintain the hegemony of the state while keeping people happy. Lee’s benevolent authoritarianism has become an art, but the principle remains the same – keep the people well fed and they won’t revolt.

However, what happens when the people aren’t well fed? In the last decade, house prices have increased dramatically, income inequality remains high, intense competition with foreigners has become a perennial source of dissatisfaction, and the younger generation no longer believes in the founding father’s formula for success. As Lee explained: “The ones under 30, who’ve just grown up in stability and growth year by year, I think they think that I’m selling them a line just to make them work harder but they are wrong. The problem is they don’t believe. They think I’m wrong.”

And now the patriarch is gone. What now?

Joseph Liow, a senior fellow who holds the Lee Kuan Yew chair in southeast Asian studies at the Brookings Institution, believes that the PAP will continue to be pragmatic. Although the pace of change will be slow, “it is precisely the pragmatic worldview that Lee has bestowed upon the Singapore system that tells [the PAP] in order to survive, you have to change.”

“It is a more complicated governance equation now, and the PAP government has sought to rise to the occasion, within limits,” said Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore. “At the level of the party as an organisation, Lee Kuan Yew and his party has always emphasised and operationalised the ideal of leadership planning and smooth succession. And it has been a long time since he handed over the reins in the party and government.”

However, some observers accuse Lee of nepotism, of making his own son, Lee Hsien Loong, prime minister. To this, the elder Lee once replied: “I am not that bereft of satisfaction with my life that I need to live vicariously through him. In fact, if he doesn’t measure up, it is better that he does not show up, because he’ll just besmirch the family reputation.”

Likewise, Song Seng Wun, an independent economist, is confident that “PM Lee remains strong enough to lead the party and to continue to focus on key issues facing the economy”.

In this time of mourning, the temptation to lionise Lee’s achievements will be great. There will even be some selective amnesia about the failures he was responsible for. So it will be good to remind ourselves that Lee was not one who liked to be patronised, neither did he like being surrounded by yes-men. He always preferred it if people cut to the chase, and he liked it when his views were challenged. Hopefully, we may do him this last favour as we honestly review his legacy. Call him the benevolent dictator. That was what made him great.