

# The Lee Kuan Yew Dividend

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Over the past week, Hasanji Dhilawala has shed tears for a man he never met.

"I am grateful to Lee Kuan Yew for the life he gave me," said the 86-year-old, who wept in his wheelchair when he finally had a chance to be in the same room as Lee to thank him.

"He was a leader who kept his promises. I am the envy of my relatives back in India," said the grandfather of five, one of more than 400,000 Singaporeans who waited for hours this week to view Lee's body as it lay in state.

The bond that the older Singaporeans like Dhilawala had with the country's first prime minister was a special one. They experienced political tumult but saw their standard of living rise dramatically in a generation, and through it all Lee Kuan Yew was their assured leader.

Indeed, Lee has been such a constant that when he fell seriously ill last month and died last Monday at age 91, the most common question was whether the People's Action Party (PAP) would decline without the man who had been its centre of gravity for 60 years. Even PAP leaders have readily admitted that nobody is likely to fill Lee's shoes.

## OPPOSITION WATERSHED

Speculation has swirled for years - receding into the background as he faded from public eye but resurfacing last week - that the PAP owed its longevity to Lee, and that it could fall apart without him. After a week of nationwide mourning, however, an intriguing new possibility has emerged: that the intense focus on his achievements and qualities could actually solidify support for his PAP.

"If the election is next week, the PAP 'sure win'," said Mr Jason Ling, a 45-year-old sub-contractor, using the colloquial slang for "guaranteed victory".

General elections are only due in January 2017 but were widely expected to be called later this year or early next year in the afterglow of the republic's 50th anniversary bash in August.

Although the PAP has won every election decisively since independence, its share of the vote dipped significantly in the 1980s. After the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States, it bounced up to 75 per cent. But in the last election, in May 2011, it fell to a historic low of 60 per cent.

That election also proved a watershed as the opposition crossed a psychological threshold - a group representation constituency (GRC) made up of multiple rather than single seats and long viewed as impregnable fell to the Workers' Party. In one fell swoop, five seats were lost, including those of two ministers, one junior minister and one potential office holder.

The PAP also lost two subsequent by-elections, with the result that seven out of 87 elected seats in parliament are now held by the opposition. In the guessing game for the next polls, pundits had predicted that one or two more GRCs and a few more single seats were well within the opposition's reach.

## THE SINGAPORE DREAM

Over the past five years, politics in Singapore has become much more contentious as voters pressure the government over a fistful of issues, from the public housing shortfall, to fixing gaps in public transport and slowing the influx of foreign talent.

The PAP has been assiduously adjusting policies. In the latest Budget, there were more handouts. Such moves and the feel-good SG50 celebrations, including generous anniversary giveaways, are seen as potentially paying dividends at the polls for the PAP.

However, Lee's sorrowful send-off may have an even greater impact on voters than the multimillion-dollar SG50 bash. The eulogies, including superlative tributes from abroad, appear to have focused people's minds on some of the strong fundamentals of PAP governance.

"Before he passed away, I was a little bit upset with the government, everything so expensive; my car payment every month makes me a little bit depressed," said an insurance agent who would only give his name as Low.

"But now after Mr Lee's left us, maybe I give the PAP a chance. They are trying to be more generous and honestly speaking, this is a good government. His son [Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong] is working very hard."

Low, a father of one in his 30s, is the typical younger middle-income Singaporean who is believed to hold the crucial swing vote.

Older Singaporeans are said to form the PAP's loyal base. Dhilawala, for example, sees Singapore's legendary progress reflected in his own life story. He immigrated from Mumbai, India, in 1952 with just two sets of clothes in his suitcase and 100 rupees in his pocket to work as a clerk with an uncle who paid for his passage.

He lived in the office with six other men and rose to become a gunmetal supervisor, brought his wife from India, bought a three-room Housing Board flat and raised three children. One daughter is a lawyer, another runs an online business, and his son is an oil trader. He and his children now live in private housing and spend holidays abroad.

Dhilawala's life encapsulates the Singapore Dream, Act 1, when poor young migrants could land on its shores and build a life from scratch, own a home and place their children and grandchildren on a firm footing.

Act 2 and 3 may not be as sweet a story. "After first-world status, what else can we achieve?" asked Chung Miao Ling, an IT worker in her 50s, one of the thousands of mourners for whom Lee's passing provided a moment for introspection.

But she is sold on Lee's brand of governance. "His passing has reminded me all the more why we need good, capable leaders to get things done, not just those who can talk," she said.

## A PARTING GIFT

Before the last election, social media was dominated by government critics. The PAP has been encouraging its base to speak up. Last week, finally, the silent majority showed up in force and made plain their loyalties, say many commentators.

They emerged in the long, 24-hour queues to file past Lee's coffin, in the thousands of notes and mementoes at community halls all over the island, and in the hundreds of thousands who lined the streets bid their final farewell to Lee's cortege yesterday.

"These past few days, the silent majority showed where they stand, what type of government they like," said a banker in his 50s.

Lim May Yee, 43, a businesswoman who runs a financial consultancy said: "We need strong government now, more than ever, this is what this week has reminded us."

Lee's passing appeared to help crystallise in Singaporeans' minds the benefits of strong leadership and good governance. Lee was a pragmatist obsessed with improving Singaporeans' security and quality of life.

Over the past few days, they had a refresher course on the values that Lee extolled as they pored over his life story, listened to his speeches, and saw him in action when he got things done. In death, the ultimate persuader of the people appeared to have convinced them all over again.

The bigger question is whether swing voters - mainly those who want the PAP to continue in power but with a much stronger opposition - have been similarly moved. Supporters like Chung believe this to be the case. "I believe Singaporeans will say thanks to Mr Lee by giving the party he founded the vote," she said. "This is how we will say thank you."

But even if goodwill towards the old PAP is now at an all-time high, there is no guarantee that today's PAP will be rewarded with a dividend or bounce at the polls. Supporters like Chung say that even the PAP base worries whether future party leaders will have what it takes, partly because the succession planning on who can take over from Lee's son has not been clearly mapped out.

Besides, many say that while the elder Lee's style suited his times, it may not fit new realities. One new ineluctable reality is that in the internet age, people have shorter time horizons in their expectations of their leaders and the PAP needs to find that sweet spot of being able to deliver both the long- and immediate- term promises.

What is clear is that the mourning crossed party lines. Singaporeans' own personal stories of struggle and success, ambition and achievement came together as "nationally shared emotions", said Professor David Chan, a Lee Kuan Yew fellow and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "In death, he has become larger than life. To many, Lee Kuan Yew was Singapore and the PAP; hence, I believe the good things associated with Lee Kuan Yew and, in turn, the PAP will help to boost the ruling party's electoral support."

Observers like Tan also note that the unusual nature of the events of the past week became rallies for the ruling party to reinforce its record. There were memorial services by various groups, from unions to big corporations, from grass-roots groups to the civil service. The events "have had the effect of a large, continuous political rally that are not accessible to opposition parties", says Tan.

"Perhaps, the events, recollections and emotions of the past week could be understood as LKY's farewell gift to the PAP and Singapore."

If nothing else, he says, the Lee dividend could translate into this: "The memory and the messages and images will have a tremendous impact of how Singaporeans think about the past and the future of the nation."

The past week was about a re-dedication to the mission.