

REMEMBERING LEE KUAN YEW: ONE YEAR ON; Getting on with it, as Lee Kuan Yew would have it

Chua Mui Hoong

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A year on, the nation that Lee Kuan Yew forged through sheer force of will continues to thrive. To keep doing so, Singapore will have to be bold and adapt to new challenges, just as he always did.

In the end, Mr Lee Kuan Yew was able to Rest in Peace.

Singapore's founding Prime Minister has not had to make good his pledge that "even from my sickbed, even if you are going to lower me to the grave and I feel that something is going wrong, I will get up".

One year to the day he died - March 23, 2015 - Singapore bustles and hums along.

The Republic is home to the world's second-busiest port and lies at the tip of the world's second-busiest waterway. It was ranked the most-connected country in the world, according to the Connected Index rankings compiled by McKinsey Global Institute.

It remains the second most competitive economy in the world. Last year, it attracted 15.2 million tourists. Its dollar trades strongly. It is the world's third-richest country by gross domestic product per capita on a purchasing power parity basis (US\$61,567), a measure of a country's wealth divided by its population, which takes into account inflation and living costs for comparison across countries.

As Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh observes: "One criterion of Lee Kuan Yew's success is that his passing has had no adverse consequences for Singapore.

SINGAPORE REMEMBERS

Lee Kuan Yew's legacy

What has changed in Singapore one year after Mr Lee Kuan Yew died? And what is his legacy?

A LEADER WHO STOOD WITH US

He was not a leader who stood apart from the people when that Singapore Story got going.

In the end, some may have been intimidated by his stature perhaps after more than 50 years of being our leader; others who were political oppositionists found that there wasn't going to be enough space for them and Mr Lee Kuan Yew as he would brook nothing from those he deemed to be communists or communalists.

But we would not have come so far if he were simply standing on top of a mountain, ordering people around. People identified with him and his dream for the country and were caught up in the vision to build better lives for themselves because he made it seem so possible, in such practical ways, in ways that were close to home for the ordinary Singaporean.

"DR GILLIAN KOH, Deputy Director (Research), Institute of Policy Studies

STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

His (Mr Lee's) avowed policy to centralise and dominate decision-making in all important aspects -political, social, economic- with a strong and efficient political party and Government is our greatest strength and weakness.

Our resilience as a nation still depends completely on the PAP and the civil service not stumbling or failing. The PAP and Government must have the confidence to embrace contests of ideas, new blood, and new thinking, internally and eventually externally.

Many countries and systems of government have stood the test of time. Few political parties have. Singapore might be the exception, but I don't want to pin our hopes for Singapore on us always being exceptional in every respect.

" DR WALTER THESEIRA, Senior lecturer, UniSIM

BUSINESS AS USUAL

I am quite confident that Singapore will continue to do well in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era .He has laid strong foundations that have served us well. The two prime ministers who succeeded him have ensured that Singapore can thrive without Lee Kuan Yew at the helm, although one must acknowledge that his influence was very much felt right throughout.

Singapore will outlive Lee Kuan Yew, and from what I can see, it is business as usual one year after his death although a grateful nation continues to remember him and his contributions.

"PROFESSOR TAN TAI YONG, Executive Vice-President (Academic Affairs), Yale-NUS College

NEW-FOUND DETERMINATION

If I look at who I am, and my family, it's all due to that generation of leaders who have brought Singapore to this stage. My wife and I were beneficiaries of meritocracy, getting scholarships for further studies. I am a gynaecologist, my wife is a retired principal.

Has anything changed in the last one year? I think people are more determined to see Singapore succeed according to the vision he spelt out, and I sense this especially in the youngsters-they want Singapore to succeed. There is so much hope for us, when we have young people with that kind of mindset. "

DR KEE WEI HEONG, 67, gynaecologist and a People's Action Party activist

THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY

I came to Singapore from China in October 1998, at the age of 18, to take up a scholarship to study at the National University of Singapore.

After I graduated, I got a job here. I met my wife on campus and we now have a daughter, who is two years plus, and a boy, nine months old. My parents and our home helper take care of the kids.

I decided to apply for citizenship because of my children. My wife and I weren't sure where to go at first. But then we had kids, and you study and research into the school system, and we decided we want our kids to go to primary school here, we want them to fully settle down here. The school system here encourages the learning of the Mother Tongue, the English standard is high, plus the Mathematics and Science are very good, compared to Europe and the United States.

I decided to take up Singapore citizenship this year. When I dropped my China citizenship, I felt a bit lost, but then I got my new passport, and I felt very happy. Oh, and my birthday is on National Day!

I work for a multinational company in a regional role. It is easier for me to travel with a Singapore passport, it is very convenient. My boss can ask me to travel anywhere without giving me a lot of notice, because I won't need a visa, unlike with a China passport. The first place I am going to with my Singapore passport is Taiwan, for work.

My hope for my daughter? That she can have a happy life as a normal person. My hope for my son is that he can contribute to the nation, to bring Singapore to be come a more innovative and creative place.

I never had a chance to meet Mr Lee Kuan Yew. What would I say to him if I did? I would just say to him: "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to come from China to Singapore."

" MR ZHANG WEN JIA,35, information technology project manager, who received his pink NRIC at a citizenship ceremony in Toa Payoh last Saturday

"The reason is that he has left us with strong institutions and able and honest leaders in all sectors of Singapore's public life. He also left us with certain core values and principles. His legacy has therefore survived him."

LEE'S LEGACY: A CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

Thousands of Singaporeans are setting time aside this week to remember Mr Lee.

Nur Haziqah, 16, was with schoolmates from Yishun Junior College at an open square in front of the Singapore Management University in Stamford Road, part of a throng of 1,500 Singaporeans of all races, young and old, taking part in a simple ceremony to commemorate the first anniversary of Mr Lee's death. On stage, four youths sang a specially composed song, which has an English chorus and stanzas in Malay, Mandarin and Tamil.

Nur Haziqah, hair neatly brushed away from her face, was sweating in her jacket and tie. A year ago, she had queued 10 hours with her mother to pay respects to Mr Lee. This Sunday morning, March 20, she was taking time out from studies, because "I want to thank him for all his contributions. Without him, Singapore would not be what it is today".

Her schoolmate, Mikal Sipanah, 16, nodded. Asked about his hopes for Singapore, he said: "That we will be sustainable and self-reliant, and not have to depend on others."

His reply would have cheered Mr Lee, who espoused self-reliance and resilience of a personal, fiscal and political kind.

At a nondescript building in the Bedok heartlands a few days earlier, an Indian man with a bald pate craned his neck to read what others before him had penned on a board for commemorative messages.

Then, because the next available writing space was at waist height, he knelt on one knee, oblivious to the dirt that might streak his white trousers. He penned in blue ink: "Your legacy, Our Principles to live by."

Cameras flashed, for this was Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. The place was the People's Action Party headquarters, and the occasion was the party's own ceremony to remember Mr Lee. A year after his death, the party Mr Lee founded in 1954 has become stronger. Six months ago, it defied historic trends to strengthen its mandate in the September 2015 General Election.

I asked Mr Tharman when he most misses Mr Lee. He pauses, then says that Mr Lee's legacy is everywhere, and that he thinks of Mr Lee even when he walks around his Jurong GRC estate, and sees people of all races and stations of life mingling and interacting.

Indeed, Mr Lee's legacy is Singapore - the city and its people.

He had promised an uncertain population in September 1965, when Singapore was a messy Third World town, that this would become a metropolis in 10 years - "Never fear!"

Together with an intrepid team of pioneer ministers, he helped secure Singapore's defence and safety; worked to ensure its water sufficiency; and coaxed a bunch of disparate peoples - who spoke different languages, worshipped different deities, and dreamt of going back to different ancestral lands - to put aside the past and become one nation in Singapore. Along the way, he half-coerced, half-cajoled them into improving their social habits.

His legacy is in the institutions that continue to form the bedrock of Singapore's success today: a stable political system that manages to get voters to support a capable, clean government with its eye on the long term; a highly competent and honest civil service; a thriving trade union movement; a grassroots network that reaches into the heartlands.

Mr Lee's legacy lives on, too, in the ease with which people of different races and religions interact in public spaces.

At a ceremony on Sunday organised by the ethnic-based self-help groups, Ms Rhama Sankaran, 58, was delighted to meet someone from the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. She wanted to tap their network for a project in Little India to match low-income women with jobs.

Exclaiming at the serendipity of standing next to a relevant contact, she said: "Lee Kuan Yew has brought us together!"

As he had in the emotional week of National Mourning when a nation came together.

Those of us who lived through that week will not forget the spontaneous outpouring of gratitude and grief, the snaking queues of people braving rain and heat to wait their turn to pay their respects to Mr Lee at the Parliament House, the sombre, reflective mood that prevailed throughout the island, the sharing of stories.

As historian Tan Tai Yong put it, "it was a moment, a point in time when we were given the occasion and circumstances to come together to celebrate, mourn and reflect".

Professor Tan, who is executive vice-president at Yale-NUS College, added: "We know that surges of patriotism happen in moments of accomplishments or crisis. Can this be sustained in normal circumstances? The signs are positive, but the maintenance of the bond has to be work-in-progress. It cannot be taken as a given."

ONE YEAR ON

A year is a long time in politics, but history has a longer lens. It will take years, even decades, before an objective, critical look at the titan that was Lee Kuan Yew can be attempted by historians and researchers.

But a year provides a sufficiently satisfactory juncture with which to start to assess Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew.

UniSIM senior lecturer Walter Theseira noted that all countries must examine the past critically to reflect and grow.

And given Mr Lee's own streak of unsentimental hard-headedness, "no matter how fondly we remember him, I think Mr Lee would have wanted clear-headed thinking more than fuzzy-minded praise".

A few commentators, asked their views on what aspects of Mr Lee's legacy might prove to be obstacles for the country, zoomed in on the same issue: over-centralised government.

Prof Tan noted that Singapore has a big state that permeates all levels of society. The result is a population that tends to look to the Government for answers.

Prof Tommy Koh added: "One obstacle is that the people have come to look to the Government to solve all their problems. The second obstacle is a certain arrogance in the attitude of the public sector that the Government knows best. It has become more of an issue now because the world has become more complex, the Government no longer has a monopoly on the knowledge or expertise in every field and we have a better-educated and empowered citizenry."

In their different ways, these observers point to the same problem in Singapore, when an over-dominant state defined by a strong-willed individual casts a long shadow over the nation, and other sectors (private, non-profit) and individuals don't thrive as well.

That paternalistic instinct in government remains, as does the habit among citizens of looking to the state, fostering a dependent, complaining culture. In this aspect, Singapore remains firmly under the shadow cast by Lee Kuan Yew.

But in many other areas, Singapore has begun to "grow up", as he once famously exhorted it to, and strike out on its own. It has done so for the last 26 years, after Mr Lee stepped down as Prime Minister in 1990, and especially after he retired from Cabinet in 2011.

Singapore's iconic skyline today - with the towers and sky deck of Marina Bay Sands - is a visual reminder of how the city has changed in a way its founder could not have imagined. He had declared in 1994 that casinos would be allowed here "over my dead body". Never one to

fear changing his mind, he eventually came round to the Cabinet's point of view - to allow casinos to set up shop in Singapore as part of "integrated resorts" and to have Singapore host Formula 1 races - to boost the convention business and tourism. Once he had decided, he was vocal in defence of the policy.

In social policy, the country has moved beyond Lee Kuan Yew in many ways. Competitive meritocracy has been tempered by compassion and a broader definition of merit, with policies that recognise non-academic achievement in schools, for example.

In the years since Mr Lee left Cabinet, the Government has loosened its purse strings, with a growing array of subsidies and grants - not just for the very sick, the very old or the very poor who were the only ones permitted to get welfare payments in Mr Lee's Singapore.

Workers get wage top-ups, while their employers get wage subsidies to co-fund pay increases and to supplement wages for the elderly and the low-income. The average middle-income family gets subsidised healthcare, eldercare and childcare.

Last year, Singapore introduced universal health coverage via its MediShield Life plan - decades after Mr Lee shot down his deputy PM and erstwhile Health Minister Toh Chin Chye's appeal for a universal healthcare system.

And last year, the Government decided to give a monthly allowance to low-income elderly folks, in effect a pension payout which would once have been dismissed as unwise and unsound.

Taken together, the changes have softened the "every man for himself" capitalist ethos of Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, where one works hard to fend for oneself (and one's immediate family), and the risks of financial difficulty brought by illness, old age or unemployment are borne by the individual.

Instead, there is more sharing of risks with the community, and the state. Ironically, in so doing, Singapore can be said to be coming full circle, returning to the socialist roots of its pioneers. Mr Lee after all began political life as a Fabian socialist, but changed his views after a few years in government.

He used to say in his later years that he was no longer in charge, and was a tad out of touch, and directed questions on policies, or Singapore's future, to the current crop of ministers.

In life and after death, Mr Lee casts a very big shadow. A lot of the shade provided is welcome. For example, the institutions built, the values of integrity, incorruptibility, meritocracy, multiracialism, fiscal discipline, provide space within which Singapore can grow deeper roots and thrive.

SHADY CANOPY

The question for Singapore in the future is whether it can emerge from the protective shade of Lee Kuan Yew to come into its own, much like a youth having to find his own way in the world.

A few people told me they think the post-LKY period began a few years ago, after he was past his political prime, and that Singapore already feels the impact of this.

In diplomatic circles, the feeling is that access to big powers' leaders is harder. Singapore punched above its weight in part because of the status and personality of Lee Kuan Yew. Robbed of that star appeal, leaders and diplomats will have to work harder to make Singapore relevant.

Within the public sector, a crop of high-profile corruption cases in recent years is cause for concern. It has taken 50 years for intolerance of corruption to be transplanted into Singapore, but it can be uprooted within a generation. Singapore fell from least corrupt nation in the world in 2010, to eighth in 2015, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International. Its average rank was 5.24 from 1995 until 2015.

Today, a more assertive citizenry does not hesitate to excoriate the authorities when public services do not measure up to their expectations, such as over-frequent train disruptions or hospital lapses. Then the questions inevitably arise: Is Singapore beginning to slide into performance mediocrity, condoning sloppiness? What would Lee Kuan Yew have done?

Ironically, however, another segment of Singapore society would clearly like the country to go beyond thinking about what Mr Lee would have done.

After all, new circumstances call for fresh thinking and bold answers to both novel challenges and even recurring questions. Just as Mr Lee was never wedded to an idea or ideology, he would surely not want his solutions to the problems of his times codified into a system of thought to be unthinkingly applied to a different era. Singapore, he might continue to assert, should just do what works, and get on with it.

One year on, Singapore stands tall as a testament to the success of Lee Kuan Yew's life's work as the leader of this nation. Future generations will benefit from the shade provided by his values, ideas and institutions.

But to truly become great in the future, the Republic and its people will have to go beyond and do what Mr Lee and his pioneering team did - be bold and blaze a new trail.