

Singapore's First Family Feuds Over 'Dynasty'

Jake Maxwell Watts

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A rare, public dispute between two of the children of Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, is dredging up sensitive allegations of dynastic politics and the pervasive influence of the Lee family as the country's ruling party begins to groom a new wave of leaders.

The row erupted when the former leader's daughter, Lee Wei Ling, took to Facebook on Sunday to publish an email exchange with a local newspaper that she accused of censoring an article in which she criticized what she called the "hero worship" of her father, who died at the age of 91 in March last year.

In the exchange, Ms. Lee also criticized her brother, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, for allegedly "abusing his power" and attempting to "establish a dynasty," as she put it, for holding a commemoration ceremony for the first anniversary of her father's death. Official venues such as the state palace and Parliament were opened to host commemoration events and government-funded grass-roots groups were involved in the organization of memorials to mark the anniversary.

Prime Minister Lee, who has led the country since 2004, later used his own Facebook page to respond in a post that said he was "deeply saddened" by his sister's comments and that "the accusations are completely untrue."

When contacted Monday, a spokesman for Mr. Lee declined to comment further. Ms. Lee said by phone that the dispute "is a Singaporean matter" and that "I always try to stick by the truth and that's all I'm going to say."

The row between the two Lee siblings "is another part of the conversation of leadership in tiny little Singapore, and whether a system that's sought to beat the odds in an Asian setting will carry on," said Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

The principles of "integrity, anticorruption and meritocracy will have to be proven time and again over the course of the next decade," she said.

Singapore has been a democracy since independence in 1965, but the party that Lee Kuan Yew created, the People's Action Party, has dominated every Parliament since. The late Mr. Lee served as the country's first prime minister and remained in the role for 31 years, winning widespread admiration for turning what had been a mosquito-infested backwater into a wealthy, modern trading city-state.

When he died, tens of thousands of people visited his body while it was held in state and lined its path as it was taken by gun-carriage to a crematorium.

Lee Kuan Yew's eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, 64, is now serving his third term as prime minister after a landslide election win last September, and has generally taken a softer approach to criticism than his father.

Prime Minister Lee said the election was part of his plans to prepare for a gradual "succession" by a wave of new leaders, with members of the younger generation included in the new cabinet.

The Lee family occasionally has faced accusations that it acts as a dynasty. "As a brand, it is almost indistinguishable from the Singapore brand," said Michael Barr, an associate professor at Flinders University in Australia who has written extensively and critically about Singaporean politics.

Prime Minister Lee's spokeswoman said Monday they had no further comment on the characterization of the Lee family as a dynasty.

Such criticism has rarely come from within the family before, though, and Ms. Lee's comments came as a surprise to many Singaporeans.

As a senior adviser at the National Neuroscience Institute, Ms. Lee is a regular contributor to the Straits Times and Sunday Times newspapers. In the article at the root of the dispute with her elder brother, Ms. Lee said preparations to mark her father's passing had made her uncomfortable and reminded her of China after the death of strongman former leader Chairman Mao. She singled out for particular criticism a portrait of her father made from thousands of erasers bearing the Singapore flag.

In the article, Ms. Lee said her father "would have cringed at the hero worship just one year after his death." When she and the Straits Times editor, Ivan Fernandez, disagreed on his editing of her draft, Ms. Lee posted it on Facebook, followed by a copy of the email exchange between her and Mr. Fernandez, which was later removed.

When contacted for comment, Mr. Fernandez directed attention to an editor's note in the Straits Times that said Ms. Lee's accusations were "unfounded" and alleged that she had included plagiarized content in her original draft. He said the Straits Times had intended to publish her article once it had been edited.

A post on Ms. Lee's Facebook page on Sunday said she didn't attempt to plagiarize and "simply forgot to acknowledge the source" for some of the information included in her article.

The emails, which have been deleted from Ms. Lee's Facebook page but were republished by local media, also recounted Ms. Lee telling Mr. Fernandez that she wouldn't allow her father's name "to be sullied by a dishonorable son."

On Mr. Lee's Facebook page, a post advised Singapore's cabinet to leave commemoration ceremonies to the general public.

"The idea that I should wish to establish a dynasty makes even less sense," the post said. "Meritocracy is a fundamental value in our society, and neither I, the [ruling People's Action Party], nor the Singapore public would tolerate any such attempt."