

A Look at Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's Impact on the Present and Future of Singapore Politics

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Question 2

MR. Lee Kuan Yew has made a deep and lasting impact on the politics of Singapore. That much is indisputable. Lee's dominance in Singapore's politics began back in 1954 when he formed the People's Action Party (PAP), the party in power today, and stretched until 2011, when he retired and handed over the reins to his son. It is difficult to quantify the legacy that Lee has left behind. During his reign, Lee was relentless in molding Singapore into the image he envisioned. His influence extended across domestic issues such as housing and education policies as well as foreign issues such as defence and international relations. He has been described by some as "A blunt man with no interest in small talk, he can cast aside diplomatic niceties and make outrageously provocative statements."¹ and by others as "What made him persuasive was how he addressed the concerns and interests of each side. I could see from the way both reacted that his arguments struck a chord"². Certain to say, the passing of one of Singapore's first and most prominent leaders has and will impact Singapore's politics. I will be exploring

how the PAP's landslide win in the General Election 2015 (GE 2015) has been the main impact of Lee's passing on Singapore's politics. I will then be looking at the changes in political order that will occur in the coming years due to Lee's passing.

The main impact of Lee's demise thus far has definitely been his post-mortem contribution to PAP's victory in the GE 2015. The joke has been that the election is held on the last day of the 7th month so that he can watch over the voting process. This is poignant in pointing out Lee can no longer directly influence or impact Singapore's politics. Therefore, his passing can only serve as the catalyst through which other living entities further their own agendas. In this case, I posit that the PAP has capitalised on his demise to secure a landslide victory and receive the people's mandate for another term.

This is evident during the National Day Parade (NDP) in 2015 which featured a tribute segment to the late Lee. Lee's usual seat was

¹Sesser, S. (1992, January 13). *A Nation of Contradictions* (The New Yorker, p. 37).

²Heng Swee Keat. *Remembering Lee Kuan Yew* | *A Straits Times Special* (<http://leekuaneyew.straitstimes.com/ST/chapter4.html>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

also left empty to remind Singaporeans of his absence. The state controlled media panned their cameras to the empty seat several times throughout the parade,³ making sure that the effect was felt by spectators present at the stadium as well as those watching the televised broadcast. A number of ministers including Mr. Teo Chee Hean and Mr. K. Shanmugam further increased the reach by posting pictures of the empty seat on social media.⁴ For the first time since 1969, foreign dignitaries including Malaysia's prime minister Mr. Najib Razak as well as Thailand's prime minister Mr. Prayut Chan-o-cha were invited to the parade. Mr. Najib has recently been embroiled in a corruption scandal⁵ while Mr. Prayut launched a military coup and seized power of the Thai government in 2014.⁶ The presence of these dignitaries served as a subconscious reminder of the importance of having an incorruptible government and having political stability, integral elements that Lee had always advocated. Given that Singapore has achieved political stability and incorruptibility under the leadership of Lee, Lee's contribution to Singapore has been elevated in the eyes of the Singaporean public. Lee was the PAP's secretary-general for more than 3 decades and was frequently its public face, hence it is only natural that most Singaporeans would attribute his contribution to the PAP's credit as well.

Apart from NDP 2015, Lee's impact on the PAP's political rallies cannot be discounted. The PAP has repeatedly highlighted Lee's contribution by citing the party's track record in bringing Singapore from a third world country to a first world country. They do so to in a bid to convince voters to vote for the PAP because they have a proven track record in doing well and are not sure of how the opposition

will perform when in power. In the words of Mr. S Rajaratnam, the former Foreign Minister, Singapore is "a small city-state without a hinterland, without a large domestic market and no raw materials to speak of, had a near-zero chance of survival politically, economically and militarily."⁷ Hence, a proven track record is essential because any single mistake might prove fatal given Singapore's unique circumstances. The PAP has been very deliberate in reminding voters that Singapore has achieved the goals of economic growth and social stability under its rule. Since Singapore's policies are largely formulated on pragmatism, performance legitimacy is a good method to measure the government's efficacy. In short, Lee has left behind a legacy that has and will be used by the PAP to convince the voters to vote for them on the basis of performance legitimacy.

The LKY factor may not have been the only factor, but it certainly played a part in the almost 10% swing in overall votes towards the PAP in GE 2015 as compared to GE 2011. Opposition politicians such as Prof. Tambyah have recognised its importance in garnering loyalty votes, where Singaporeans feel that they should not "betray" the PAP given all of Lee's contribution, thereby influencing the results of the election.⁸ The PAP has also understood its importance. The GE was most likely scheduled to be held in 2016 as there were many events and activities planned as part of the SG50 celebrations as well as the 28th SEA games. It was probably brought forward after Lee's passing so that the PAP could capitalise on the LKY factor, thus highlighting the perceived impact of the LKY factor on the elections.

Singapore does not subscribe to socialism or capitalism. She subscribes to pragmatism

³Polar. *NATIONAL DAY 2015* (<https://simplypolar.wordpress.com/2015/08/09/national-day-2015/>) Retrieved 19 Sept. 2015.

⁴Teo Chee Hean. *Teo Chee Hean* (<https://www.facebook.com/MrTeoCheeHean?fref=ts>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

⁵Fuller, Thomas. *Investigations Stymied In Malaysia, Critics Of Najib Razak Take Their Case Global* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/world/asia/investigations-stymied-in-malaysiacritics-of-najib-razak-take-their-case-global.html>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

⁶The Straits Times. *Thai PM Prayut Chan-O-Cha Threatens Critics Of Government With Detention* (<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-pm-vents-fury-threatens-attitudeadjustment>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

⁷Hussin Mutalib. (2003) *Parties and Politics, A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* (Chpt. 8 pp. 273)

⁸Neo Chai Chin, Laura Elizabeth Philomin *Alternative policies, refreshed image fail to lift SDP - Channel News Asia* (<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/alternative-policies/2121794.html>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

which is why I envision a substantial change in the political order in the coming years. Unlike socialism or capitalism which prescribe a certain method of solving economic or social issues, pragmatism favours the solution which works best in a particular scenario. Hence, it gives the government the flexibility of executing 180° turn in its policies and still stay true to its ideology. The government can justify policy shifts by claiming that it was not feasible in the past but it is practical today. The opposition will not be able to use these policy shifts as ammunition to attack the government. This would encourage the government to embrace policy changes without fear of recrimination.

The rule of law in Singapore will gradually relax due to popular demand. A debate to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code was carried out in 2007. Section 377A criminalised sodomy, which to a more conservative Singapore back then, was still not widely accepted⁹. Since then, the better educated populace has been increasingly more vocal on controversial issues such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) debate. Pink Dot 2015 had an estimated turnout greater than any past Pink Dot events¹⁰. There has been increasing dissent which resulted in the record turnout. There has also been increasing lawbreaking as the LGBT community has gradually become more open. But these are both ways we change as a society. There has to be a period when such activities are illegal but yet increasingly accepted by society. In time to come, the majority will look around and exclaim that it wasn't as bad as they had once thought it was, laws will then be re-enacted to reflect these reversed views. It is unfathomable to think that there once existed a ban on long hair for males in

the 1960s. One day, we will look back on these LGBT laws and think how ridiculous it was back then. Lee had always been known to govern Singapore with an iron fist. His resignation from public office and subsequently his demise, would serve as a catalyst to speed up social change and the relaxation of laws.

There has also definitely been a post LKY shift in the government's stance toward freedom of speech. Lee used to be able to act with impunity, suing the Far Eastern Economic Review for libel¹¹ in 2006 and the Wall Street Journal in 2008. However, the government has been much more tolerant in the recent Amos Yee incident. Despite fierce criticism from "The New Yorker" and "The Guardian", the government has not taken any legal action against them. Such a shift could have been caused by the increased scrutiny of the government's action by both the public and the international human rights community through social media and other alternative avenues. Yee's 4 weeks sentence has attracted reprise from the United Nations.¹² It may not be long before the tolerance accorded to foreign publications is extended to cover local citizens such as Yee. When Lee Hsien Loong sued Roy Ngerng in 2014, Roy managed to raise over \$100,000 through crowd funding from public contributions.¹³ It probably sent the incumbent government a clear message that Singaporeans did not like seeing the government enforcing its rein in such a manner and they are willing to put their money where their mouth is to support David in the battle against Goliath.

The government's treatment of opposition politicians has also shifted post LKY. In 1963, Lee could felled more than a 100 leftists at one go

⁹Imelda Saad. *PM Lee: Why Singapore must 'leave Section 377A alone'* (<http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20071023-31769.html>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

¹⁰Asiaone. *Pink Dot 2015 draws record crowd: Organisers* (<http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/pink-dot-2015-draws-record-crowd-organisers>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

¹¹Southeast Asian Press Alliance. *Prime minister and his father sue "Far Eastern Economic Review" for libel* (http://www.ifex.org/singapore/2006/09/14/prime_minister_and_his_father_sue/) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

¹²States Times Review. *United Nations: Amos Yee's treatment is disproportionate and inappropriate* (<http://statetimesreview.com/2015/06/22/united-nations-amos-yees-treatment-isdisproportionate-and-inappropriate/>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015

¹³Asiaone. *Blogger Roy Ngerng: 'I do not hate the PM'* (<http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/blogger-roy-ngerng-i-do-not-hate-pm>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

through Operation Coldstore. The then government accused the leftists of having communist ties and even forced confessions out of them which were then broadcasted on mass media. At that time, it was possible for the government to justify such an action and the public could be appeased or even convinced. In 2001, Lee sued Mr. Chee Soon Juan over a single remark, when Chee had asked the incumbent government about an \$18 billion loan to the Indonesian government.¹⁴ The atmosphere at post-LKY GE 2015 was remarkably different. The Worker's Party (WP) attacked the PAP with the issue of a \$282,000 deficit in Punggol East's accounts¹⁵ and accused the PAP of using the Ministry of National Development (MND) to mount an attack against the WP.¹⁶ The PAP was not above such mud-slinging as well, bringing up the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) issue numerous times during its rallies. The PAP accused the WP of poor accounting practices and awarding large contracts without going through the proper tender process. Overall, the public's perception was that such tactics were only distractions from the real issues at hand. As a first world country today, Singapore does have a reputation to uphold. In order to retain its legitimacy, the government has to show the world that the elections were conducted in a fair and just manner. Singapore can no longer afford to be condemned by the United Nations¹⁷ and walk away scot-free.

The government's stance on privacy is probably going to change as well. The government does not make it a secret that it spies on the

people. The Media Development Authority (MDA) blocks access to certain pornographic websites, indirectly telling the people that the government knows which websites you are visiting. It is through such web filtering that the government is able to apprehend the hacker behind the defacement of the Istana page within just three days.¹⁸ Privacy is one of the rights specified in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most developed countries have privacy laws in place to protect its citizens. The United States (US) has the Fourth Amendment while the United Kingdom (UK) has the Human Rights Act of 1998. Singapore is taking a step in this direction with the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA), which prevents companies from sharing your personal information without your explicit consent. Nonetheless, the PDPA does not apply to government agencies. I foresee Singapore taking a leaf out of US and UK's books, implementing such laws so as to appease the international human rights community.

However, increased privacy conflicts with the goal of national security. Without monitoring its citizens, the government is unable to weed out potential terrorists or extremists before they strike. As such, I believe that Singapore has and will continue to follow the lead of US and UK in bringing such surveillance activity underground. The National Security Agency (NSA) of the US conducts a surveillance program, codenamed PRISM, which collects internet communications data covertly. Singapore has also recently shown interest in such technologies when it was exposed as a

¹⁴Amnesty International UK. *Singapore: Defamation suits threaten Chee Soon Juan and erode freedom of expression* (<http://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/singapore-defamation-suits-threaten-cheesoon-juan-and-erode-freedom-expression>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

¹⁵Tham Yuen-C. *AHPETC issues 2 statements on Punggol East accounts* (<http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ahpetc-issues-2-statements-on-punggol-eastaccounts>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

¹⁶Ng Jun Sen. *Sylvia Lim accuses PAP of using MND to attack WP* (<http://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore-news/sylvia-lim-accuses-pap-using-mnd-attack-wp>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015.

¹⁷States Times Review. *United Nations: Amos Yee's treatment is disproportionate and inappropriate* (<http://statetimesreview.com/2015/06/22/united-nations-amos-yees-treatment-isdisproportionate-and-inappropriate/>) Retrieved 14 Sept. 2015

¹⁸STOMP. *Businessman admits to Istana and PMO website hacking* (<http://singaporeseen.stomp.com.sg/singaporeseen/this-urban-jungle/businessman-admits-to-istana-and-pmo-website-hacking>) Retrieved 19 Sept. 2015.

¹⁹TREmeritus. *Singapore's IDA reported to have dealings with spyware firm* (<http://www.theonlinetizen.com/2015/07/singapores-ida-reported-to-have-dealings-with-spyware-firm/>) Retrieved 19 Sept. 2015.

client of Hacking Team, ¹⁹ an IT company which offers tools that provide surveillance capabilities to governments.

By bringing these much needed surveillance activities underground, the government is able to continue monitoring its citizens for signs of radicalization while continuing to stay on the good side of human rights advocates.

Singapore has had a good start for the first 50 years of her journey. Much of it has been attributed to the good leadership of Lee, who

has been heavily involved in her politics even before independence. Lee's heavy handed approach towards the governance of Singapore might not have won him many fans, but few dispute the progress that Singapore has achieved while under his rein. His strategy of adopting best practices from other countries might have worked fantastically well in the past, but today, there are few countries left from which we can learn from. It would be naive to think that Singapore can continue its meteoric growth just by continuing what we have been doing for the past 50 years. Economic growth should no longer be the main focus of Singapore. Singapore should move towards greater social progress, towards an improvement in our overall quality of life. The government is aware, the electorate will make sure of that, change will happen.