

The beginning of the end of Lee Kuan Yew's dynasty?

By Kunihiko Miyake

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On March 23, Singapore lost its first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. The good news for the small island is that he was a great founding father. The bad news is that he was their only founding father. This could mean that the departure of Lee will be the beginning of the end for the tropical miracle in 20th century Southeast Asia.

The world media praised him as a great statesman who transformed that tiny island outpost into one of the wealthiest and least corrupt countries in Asia. In Japan, the Emperor and Empress sent flowers to Lee's state funeral, and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who attended the funeral, called him "one of the greatest leaders of modern times that Asia has ever produced."

President Xi Jinping must have envied Lee for his successful battle against corruption among government officials in Singapore. While Xi has to resort to harsh measures to crack down on corrupt officials, Singapore linked the salaries of ministers, judges, and other high-ranking officials to the highest incomes of top CEOs in the private sector, thereby eliminating the reason officials become corrupt – not having enough money.

President Vladimir Putin must have envied Lee for his political longevity, even in his post-retirement period. No matter how popular Putin might be now, it is doubtful that he can survive his retirement, which might involve political death in the bloody history of power struggles in the Russian Empire.

President Barack Obama must have envied Lee for his global, if not local, popularity as a great statesman. Lee is considered powerful, efficient, determined, inventive, forward-looking, and pragmatic, while Obama is viewed by many in the United States and abroad, as weak, inefficient, prone to political flip-flopping, amateurish, inert, and stubborn.

President Richard Nixon reportedly speculated that, had Lee lived in another time and place, he might have "attained the world stature of a Churchill, a Disraeli, or a Gladstone." This, however, is an overstatement. If Lee Kuan Yew had been born in the United Kingdom, he might have ended up being an underdog in the House of Commons.

The reason is simple. Yes, he could run an island of millions without democracy. However, he would probably not have been able to rule a nation of tens of millions under democracy where his opponents would have been free to

criticize and even try to ruin him if circumstances permitted. Such a political landscape has never existed in Singapore.

Moreover, Lee didn't believe in democracy, at least in a Western sense. Reportedly, he once stated in 1994 that, "If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way you can govern a Chinese society." He may be right but does this mean that he was great only because he governed a Chinese society in a Chinese dynastic way?

No, because he was not simply Chinese when he ruled Singapore. The genius of Lee Kuan Yew is that he mixed and made the most of the best aspects of the British and Chinese cultures, namely the Britons' systematic social and organizational structures, and the Chinese pragmatic efficiency in implementing policies.

In a nutshell, Singapore is not a country but a meritocratic family business enterprise. You don't need democracy when you run a company. All you need are a skillful CEO and his or her trusted managers to keep the business operations going forward. The business entity should be neatly managed and the last thing you need is internal opposition to the executive board.

The majority of people who live in Singapore do not seem to have longed for power. What they have wished for so far is money, period. However, this is not the end of the miraculous story in Southeast Asia. What if people started longing for power in addition to money now that the charismatic founding father is gone?

Since the island had no other founding fathers, Singapore has no experience of real political competition, and therefore may be more vulnerable to political pluralism in the future. Stable democratic societies have all experienced a series of tough domestic political power struggles, which make their democracies more resilient in the long run.

Where does Singapore go from here? This is not our call. It should be the ordinary Singaporeans who make the decision. If they wish to exercise power instead of just making money, Singapore will truly become a nation. If not, Singapore will continue to be a huge family business enterprise virtually owned by a single tribe. It is up to the Singaporeans who have the right to choose.

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