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Lee Kuan Yew's Leadership: Model for China?

By Benjamin Ho

Synopsis

Singapore's governance model is widely touted to be world-class. Much of it is due to the brand of its political leadership which is studied by many countries around the world, not least China.

Commentary

DESPITE being the last country in Southeast Asia to formally recognise the People's Republic of China in 1990, Sino-Singapore relations are highly advanced; the city-state engages deeply with China in multiple dimensions of bilateral ties – economic, cultural and political. Both countries' heads-of-state are also scheduled to visit each other this year to commemorate 25 years of bilateral relationship.

The relationship was built up in large measure by the first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, beginning with his path-breaking visit to China in 1976 when he called on Chairman Mao Tse-tung. In his condolences to the Singapore government over the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Chinese president Xi Jinping described Lee as an "old friend to the Chinese people [who is] widely respected by the international community as a strategist and a statesman" as well as the "founder, pioneer and promoter of China-Singapore relations".

Lee Kuan Yew's leadership as a model for China?

Notwithstanding his opposition to the Communist Party of Malaya in the 1950s and 60s, during the early years of the People's Republic of China, his friendship and goodwill with subsequent Chinese leaders grew, most notably Deng Xiaoping, whom he first met in Singapore in November 1978. Lee described Deng as the "most impressive leader I have met". In his memoirs, Lee recollected that he had "never met a communist leader who was prepared to depart from his brief when confronted with reality...At 74, when he was faced with an unpleasant truth, [Deng] was prepared to change his mind." This included changing China's view of Singapore, which till then, was perceived as a "running dog" of the West.

As noted by Harvard's Ezra Vogel: "A few weeks after Deng visited Singapore, this description of Singapore disappeared...Instead, Singapore was described as a place worth studying for its initiatives

in environmental preservation, public housing, and tourism.” And Lee went on to persuade Deng to call off the CCP’s support for the CPM’s insurgency in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

Indeed, China’s benevolence towards Singapore over the past two decades should not be explained as simply for securing markets for its economic exports or for geo-strategic reasons. The focus, instead was on domestic governance in so far as Singapore represented a model of efficient and effective government that provided prosperity and stability for its people. In 2012, President Xi ordered China Central Television to produce a series on Singapore for the benefit of Chinese learning.

Studies in Chinese leadership patterns have shown that a paternalistic leadership model to be most reflective of indigenous Chinese preferences. Defined as a type of leadership that combines strong and clear authority with concern, consideration, and elements of moral suasion, such a leadership style is identified with transformational leadership, one that places the leader as the agent of transformation, whereas the organisation and the followers are the target of the transformation.

Transformational leadership also obliges the leader to transcend the individual interests of the followers, while at the same time uniting them behind the collective interests of the organisation, a posture that befits the Confucian ideal of the sagely king or the superior gentleman. The Chinese saying, “If a leader sets a bad example, subordinates are likely to follow suit” (*shangliangbuzheng xialiangwai*) relates well to both Singapore and China, societies that are – in varying degrees - influenced by Confucian thought patterns.

Indeed, the need of a strong – and upright - leader features prominently in Chinese politics, more so when at stake is the effective governance, survivability and prosperity of a country of 1.3 billion people. Not merely as servants of the state reflecting and representing the will of the people, the Chinese leader is expected to lead the nation, to the extent of over-riding popular will, if he deems necessary.

Lee Kuan Yew as *leader par excellence*

Lee’s decision-making process can be best summed up on the basis of “what works” – often defined by stability and orderly progress - rather than “what is demanded” by popular opinion. Lee’s disdain for the “marketplace of ideas” was also seen in the manner in which he selected his inner circle of political confidantes regarding policy-making matters. Lee’s “three orbits of leadership” as observed, comprised of an inner ring whose members were Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, and Toh Chin Chye; the second and third orbits consisted of allies he respected and trusted and those who have proven themselves competent.

In Cabinet meetings, he valued quality of opinions more than the quantity of votes, as Lee himself puts it, “In the Cabinet, I would say there were about five or six strong ministers with strong views. And you want to get a consensus if you can. If you can’t, then you get the majority in numbers: I would prefer the strong ministers to back the policy. If one or two strong ministers strongly felt, very fervently, against the policy, I would postpone it because I would take their objectives very seriously”.

Strong leadership, in Lee’s mind, also meant not bending to the pressures and interests of external powers, particularly that of more powerful countries. This was crucial in the early years of Singapore’s independence in which it had yet to establish deep ties with the international community.

Former head of the Singapore public service Lim Siong Guan, who served under Lee, relates how Lee had instructed him in the conduct of the country’s foreign affairs: “Lee told me that in the course of my work, I would be dealing with foreigners, and advised: “Always look the foreigner in his eyes. Never look down. You are dealing with him as a representative of Singapore. *Conduct yourself as his equal.*”

Leadership transition in both Singapore and China

Given Lee’s towering influence on Singapore’s political scene, Singapore’s political transition from first to third generation of leaders has been remarkably smooth – an attribute that is also shared by the

ascension of President Xi Jinping to power, notwithstanding the factional differences that are the hallmark of one-party systems. This is where comparisons between Singapore and China end.

Given the changing social demographics in Singapore and the opening up of its socio-political space, the one-party model that has served Singapore for the past 50 years since its independence cannot be indefinitely taken for granted, as various scholars have observed.

But for China to acquiesce to such proposals for liberal political reforms is unimaginable, given the present climate where President Xi is said to wield unprecedented power, both personal and within the party. As Elizabeth Economy puts it in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, if Xi's reforms could yield a "corruption-free, politically cohesive, and economically powerful one-party state with global reach", it would be like "a Singapore on steroids". Whether China is able to achieve the Chinese Dream remains to be seen, but what is certain is that the political legacy bequeathed by Lee is instructive for China's future.

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