

Lee Kuan Yew: Which way now for Singapore?

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Singaporeans have been laying flowers and cards at tribute corners set up by companies and the government.

As Singapore mourns the death of founding father Lee Kuan Yew, questions are also quietly being asked about where the country goes next.

Mr Lee had been out of the political limelight for years when he died but his authoritarian model, which brought stability and wealth, remains. Yet economic success and globalisation have presented Singapore with new challenges, such as a widening income gap and a new generation who are demanding greater political participation.

Which elements of his model might Singapore move away from and which are here to stay?

Exceptionalism



Singapore has become one of the richest cities in the world, but also has a significant income gap

"We knew that if we were just like our neighbours, we would die. Because we've got nothing to offer against what they have to offer. So we had to produce something which is different and better than what they have," said Mr Lee in a 2007 interview.

A tiny island with no resources except its people, Singapore's population had to be better educated and speak better English than regional counterparts - so English was taught as a first language, and the government invested in schools and education subsidies for the poor.

In a region where corruption is endemic, Singapore had to offer clean government and an attractive business environment. It also had to be flexible - reinventing itself to stay relevant, whether as a manufacturing hub or later as a financial and green technology centre.

Such thinking remains integral. Today, Singapore is consistently ranked one of **the least corrupt, safest, and most business-friendly** countries in the world.

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"We thrive by being different in a purposive way. We make good governance a necessity and an imperative, we are very open economically," says Singapore Management University law academic Eugene Tan.

Government knows best



Mr Lee's People's Action Party is now led by his son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

"We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think," said Mr Lee of his government in 1986.

Under Mr Lee's model, the government took care of running the country and delivered progress in return for citizens' obedience.

His People's Action Party (PAP) remains dominant. The government still controls the media with strict laws, dominates key business sectors through government-linked companies, and rules the unions.



Chee Soon Juan: "You've got to do something other than instil fear"

But a younger, more educated generation are calling for greater political diversity. In the last election, while the opposition won only six seats in parliament due to the first-past-the-post system, the PAP secured only 60% of the popular vote - its lowest ever.

Tough state control is being challenged in some areas. One example is **gay rights**, with a growing public movement urging an end to a law that effectively outlaws homosexuality.

The explosive growth of an internet-savvy generation, meanwhile, has allowed debate over national issues to expand - in turn, the government has **sought tighter regulation**.

Devadas Krishnadas, chief executive of Future Moves, a strategy consultancy which advises governments and businesses, says "the population feels restless for a change".

"The tricky part for present political leaders is deciding where, how much and how fast to change... their main task is to develop a coherent road map to a new political destiny."

Elitist model



Many Singaporeans worry about social mobility in their children's generation

"It is essential to rear a generation at the very top of society that has all the qualities needed to lead and give the people the inspiration and the drive to make it succeed. In short, the elite," declared Mr Lee in 1966.

He believed a mandarin class should run the country. This gave rise to Singapore's meritocratic model, where regardless of race or class, anyone good enough could make it to the top.

Singaporeans have long accepted this system. But many worry about social mobility **and point to the fact** that the proportion of students getting into top schools who come from wealthy educated families is increasing.

Some feel that elite technocrats have become more indifferent to their needs and the PAP lacks the view of the "man of the street".

The government has since conducted more public consultations, made policy shifts on contentious issues such as immigration and retirement savings, and **pumped in resources** to

less well-funded schools. The PAP has also **promised** to refresh its ranks with more from the grassroots.

Addressing problems would get easier "if the PAP can shake off some of its elitist instincts and anxiety about being held to greater account by citizens", says Garry Rodan, politics and international studies professor at Murdoch University.

Racial harmony and bilingualism



Singapore's multi-racial, multi-cultural citizenry paid respect to Mr Lee as he laid in state the past week

"Crucial (to Singapore) is interracial, interreligious harmony. Without that, quarrelling with one another, we are doomed," said Mr Lee in a 2011 interview.

Singapore has four major races and ten official religions. Scarred by race riots in the 1960s, it maintains strict hate speech laws and racial quotas in public housing - which the majority live in - to prevent ethnic enclaves from developing. Incidents where people are caught using racist language always elicit public outrage.

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Mr Lee also believed it necessary for Singaporeans to remain connected to their cultural roots and speak their "mother tongue", such as Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. To this day, every Singaporean studies a second language in school.

These policies have "significant buy-in" from the current leadership, and are likely to continue as they have preserved stability in Singapore and ensured a more nimble workforce, says Mr Tan.

'Tight-fisted' welfare



With increasing inequality and costs of living, many have called for greater help for the elderly

"The principle is that you must work. We are not going to pay you for lying around," said Mr Lee in 2011 about welfare supplements. He had a strong aversion to the welfare state and thought it encouraged laziness.

Citizens are expected to shoulder much of the burden of taking care of themselves and their families. There is no national minimum wage, and Singaporeans are forced to save for retirement instead of receiving pensions. While subsidies and handouts exist, some believe the amounts are insufficient.

The system, which results in a lean government, has its fans. But with increasing inequality there has been greater concern for the poor, disabled and elderly, and calls for more social spending.

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The government has responded with tentative moves towards universal healthcare coverage and greater support for the elderly.

"The greatest challenge facing Singapore in this era is to reconcile participation in a highly competitive globalised economy with a more equitable distribution of resources," says Professor Rodan, who adds that it can afford to do so given its sizeable financial reserves.