

## Analysis: NDR a rallying call to the nation

*In a commentary on TODAY, SMU Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan says this year's National Day Rally was used to reinforce fundamental policies, and had "an eye and ear" on the coming General Election.*

By Eugene K.B. Tan, TODAY, POSTED: 24 Aug 2015 07:35 UPDATED: 24 Aug 2015 07:40



PM Lee Hsien Loong speaking at the National Day Rally on Aug 23. (Photo: Xabryna Kek)

SINGAPORE: The context to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's milestone National Day Rally (NDR) speech on Sunday night (Aug 24) bears reiterating. First, the NDR marks the finale of sorts to Singapore's Golden Jubilee celebrations. Second, the Republic is probably a few weeks away from a general election to elect its representatives for the 13th Parliament. This comes as leadership renewal and political succession gather pace, if not urgency.

In a panoramic sweep of what brought about Singapore's phenomenal transformation in half a century, PM Lee covered a broad range of issues from domestic to foreign.

He acknowledged that the NDRs in recent years had focused on domestic issues with inadequate attention paid to international developments and how they impact Singapore, particularly as this tiny red dot's survival and prosperity depend on it being relevant to the global political economy.

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The NDR was also a National Education lesson, taking Singaporeans through the trials and tribulations of our nation-building. The focus on Singapore's founding ethos, including the determination to overcome the fault-lines of race, language, and religion, was particularly apt. These are the values that bind Singaporeans together amid rapid change. In a similar vein, ample tributes to the Pioneer Generation and senior citizens who set the stage for Singapore's success were very much the order of the evening.

PM Lee's speech was a rallying cry to the nation, and for which references to the NDR would be extensive during the (likely) hustings in the coming weeks.

PM Lee used the NDR as a broad canvas to reinforce the fundamental policies, such as multiracialism, housing, education, and foreign policy that have made the distinct difference to Singaporean society and government.

This NDR differs from PM Lee's earlier ones in his attempt to appeal more to the heart than the head. It was a personable outreach that sought to highlight the many bonds that bind the country. He also took the opportunity to expound on immigration, which is likely to be a hot button issue in the next general election. Much as it is a polarising issue, immigration needs to be addressed head-on. Last night, Mr Lee reiterated that there are no easy choices on immigration, but he has a duty to make a judgment and decide in the best interests of the country.

Those who expected this year's NDR to be a blockbuster packed with goodies were not disappointed either. There were "SG50 bonuses" for all Singaporeans, the icing on the cake to top off the SG50 celebrations.

As in past NDRs, Mr Lee devoted some attention to babies and families. Enhanced baby bonuses, grants, and the doubling of paternity leave are timely measures that could add impetus to signs of improved fertility rates and reduce Singapore's dependence on immigration.

The focus on the next generation of Singaporeans is not surprising given Mr Lee's emphasis on the future in his speech. He also exhorted young Singaporeans that the "best days were ahead of us" and that there are still rainbows to chase.

Chasing rainbows was one of many allusions to the late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who had initiated the NDR in 1966 as a platform for the Prime Minister to address Singaporeans,

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provide an overview of the Government's performance, and highlight the nation's key challenges and its future directions. Using the vantage point of the massive outpouring of grief at the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew in March this year, PM Lee also recalled vignettes of Mr Lee Kuan Yew in his halcyon days and in his passing.

## **THE NEXT PHASE OF DEVELOPMENT**

In my view, the need to infuse into Singapore the same indomitable spirit of the founding fathers and the Pioneer Generation must be the bedrock of nation-building. Given that we are already in "election season", the NDR unsurprisingly had an eye and ear to the upcoming General Election. The regular references to "election" in PM Lee's speech provided a strong indication that GE2015 would be called some time this week.

The themes of political leadership and long-term planning were ever present throughout the NDR. Casting an eye to the next 50 years, PM Lee also sought to impress on the audience why the next General Election bears heightened importance even though leadership renewal has consistently been a focal point for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) at every election.

In tandem with the election mode, PM Lee ended by reminding Singaporeans of the trust between the PAP Government and Singaporeans throughout these years. He urged Singaporeans to give his Government a strong mandate for the next phase of Singapore's development, including putting in place the fourth-generation leadership. How Singaporeans will respond to the PM's clarion call will be known in the weeks ahead.

The NDR speech was a poignant reminder that 50 years ago, we only had the trappings of a state at the hasty founding of independent Singapore. We were a state in search of a nation. This was a reversal of the normal course of a nation in search of a state. Today, although still a work-in-progress, we have a viable nation-state. However, past success is no guarantee of future success. As PM Lee said, staying special will be key for this little red dot to remain a home we can all be proud of.

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