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Headline: Strategic planning is crucial

## **Strategic planning is crucial; Prominent Singaporeans are grappling with how their tiny city state can ensure its long-term success, writes Sue-Ann Chia**

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BY SUE-ANN CHIA

A rookie politician from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) roused the rally audience by asking them to "kee chiu" - Hokkien for "raise your hands" - on how many more years they expect Singapore to survive.

He started with five years and went all the way to 200 years. Most raised their hands up till 100 years, but the numbers started to drop off thereafter.

That was in 2011, before the general election that year. But the existential question is very much in vogue today, as Singapore marks its 50th year of independence - with possibly another election.

The intelligentsia on the island has been grappling to predict the future of this improbable nation that surprised many with its meteoric rise to a modern metropolis. Prominent thinkers such as Kishore Mahbubani even produced a book this year, provocatively titled *Can Singapore survive?*

Indeed, can a small state such as Singapore survive another 50 or even 100 years?

Four years ago, the PAP's Chan Chun Sing was widely ridiculed for how he conducted the informal poll, earning him the moniker of "kee chiu minister". But the minister in the prime minister's office raised not just hands, but also some interesting points then.

He noted the dismal track record of small states' survival in the past 700 years, with few in Southeast Asia going beyond 100 years. There were two which he cited, both from Indonesia - Lanfang Republic in West Kalimantan and the Sultanate of Demak in Java.

The republic lasted 107 years from 1777 to 1884 when the Dutch occupied the territory, while the sultanate survived only 73 years from 1475 to 1548 when the third generation royal leader died. While circumstances were very different in those times, Chan's major points were that small states need exceptional leadership to survive, and citizens have to vote for the right leaders - which is still relevant today.

Fast forward to 2015, and the fascination over the fate of Singapore has intensified as the country celebrates the half-century mark. The death of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew in March has also accentuated concerns about the country's, and by extension, the PAP's future.

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For many analysts, they believe the country can live on but a question mark hangs over the quality of its existence. Will Singapore be as successful in the next 50 years, or will the past be better than the future?

"The reality is that a small state like Singapore, with no natural resources and little inherent strategic depth, will be our perpetual vulnerability. But these constraints are not destiny," observes Eugene Tan, Singapore Management University law don.

"Our survival and prosperity will hinge on whether Singaporeans are determined to make Singapore succeed by being relevant to the world."

There are two forces that will determine the country's destiny. The first is domestic politics and policies. The second is global relevance in a part of the world that is now shaped by a rising China.

"The way I see it, Singapore in the next 50 years is almost certainly going to remain a sovereign nation. But escaping an apocalyptic demise only to suffer a more mundane descent into mediocrity is no reason to be jubilant," noted prominent businessman Ho Kwon Ping in a recent commentary.

There are enough disturbing trends to conceive of a future where Singapore languishes in the ranks of second or even third-tier economies.

"The fundamental cause of this slow-motion demise will be, simply, complacency and hubris: Like the proverbial frog which unwittingly boils to a slow death, we may have no clue of what is happening to us and around us," Ho cautioned.

His warning comes at a time when Singapore is facing several pressures: a shrinking and ageing population, a slowing economy, and increasing income inequality where the country's wealth is not equally distributed.

If Singapore does not fix these fundamental problems, survival will be futile.

Sketching out what Singapore needs to do over the next 50 years, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said recently that getting the economy to "the next level" was important in the next decade. "If we don't get to the next level then we will have malaise and angst and even disillusionment, which you see in many developed countries. And in 25 years, if we can't get our demography balance between our births and immigration of foreign workers, then we will be in a very tight spot," he said.

The most critical, however, is forging a national identity over the next half a century. "Before you make any policies and get people to say 'I want to do this or the other', people must feel that we are Singaporeans and we want to be together and we are different from others and we are special", he added.

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But the government may not have all the answers to these problems, observe analysts who point to some form of political plurality as a solution.

Noting that the PAP's longevity has surpassed many other political parties, Ho said it should continue as a dominant party but there would also be a rise in the share of opposition parliamentary seats until an equilibrium is reached.

At present, the PAP has 80 out of 87 seats in Parliament. Ho puts the equilibrium at a quarter to one-third of opposition politicians in the house.

Apart from domestic pressures, Singapore also needs to remain relevant in the international arena.

In this regard, the country needs to be exceptionally successful so that it is not as easily dismissed by other larger countries, notes ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan, who says citizens need to be more well-versed in foreign policy and the country's history.

Singapore also has to negotiate relations between superpower America and a more muscular China, whose officials disturbingly describe Singapore - which believes in meritocracy and multiracialism - as a "Chinese country" due to its ethnic Chinese majority, he adds. Yet, all this political pontification could be just a "waste of time", noted prominent diplomat Tommy Koh, who was quoting his wife, at a conference to examine Singapore's future. She reminded him that nobody knew Singapore would turn out to be such a success 50 years ago. Likewise, nobody can tell what the future holds.

But as Mahbubani advises, embracing the country's roots of courage and creativity will not hurt. "This culture of risk-taking may well be the best way to ensure Singapore's long-term survivability as many new challenges will come our way," he wrote in his book. "We must develop the culture of courage to respond boldly to each new wave of challenges.

"If we do so, the final answer to the question 'can Singapore survive?' may well be 'yes, we can'."