

Book Review

Lee Kuan Yew (2000), *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000*, published by Harper Collins, New York 10007, United States of America, Pages:729 (including index), ISBN: 0060197765, price: US\$ 35.

This book is written as a memoir of Lee Kuan Yew. It has three sections. The first section, 'Getting the Basics Right', is classified into 15 subsections (Going It Alone, Building an Army from Scratch, Britain Pulls Out, and so forth). In this section, the author discusses the country's early period issues. Singapore had been under British control since 1819, and it became an independent nation in 1965 after separating from Malaysia. Singapore has a scarcity of natural resources, a limited land area, and domestic ethnic conflicts. He tried to tackle each issue step by step.

He studied in Britain and returned to Singapore in 1950. After this, he joined the People's Action Party (PAP) and then became the first prime minister in 1959. Initially, Lee focused on developing a credible military to maintain national security, including acquiring international expertise and promoting compulsory military service. Sometimes, social conflict occurred between Malaysian and non-Malaysian people, but he helped integrate them.

His philosophy was that if a country could educate and train its people to the standards of First World nations, economic growth and development were possible. That is, the production of low-quality products or services and Third World habits should be upgraded. Therefore, his government sought to improve quality across sectors such as education, roads and bridges, seaports, airports, telecommunications, banking services, and so forth.

Lee's government was devoted to creating Singapore as a corruption-free nation. When PAP came to power in 1959, it sought to eliminate corruption by introducing strict anti-corruption policies and establishing the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). In addition, competitive salaries were offered to ministers to foster honest and stable leadership. In 1984, he proposed an elected president to protect the country's reserves and oversee corruption investigations, a concept later incorporated into the constitution. Such a system of transparency and accountability helped Singapore navigate the 1997 financial crisis more effectively than other economies.

The government also planned to demolish old and weak houses and construct modern houses for all citizens. However, there were several challenges in transforming a traditional society into a modern city-state. For example, the

government provided flats in modern housing, but farmers were reluctant to move there. Some farmers also reared pigs in new houses for some time.

Lee did not prefer welfare state models exactly like those in Canada and Europe. He argued that the welfare costs of the current generation should not become a burden for the next generation. He posited that high tax rates and dependence on the government may undermine societal stability and erode economic and entrepreneurial motivation. To solve market disparities and human skill gaps, the economy combined competitiveness with equitable wealth redistribution, prioritizing mandatory medical savings and homeownership.

He also practiced and responded to some controversial demography-related policies. One example was the 1983 ‘Great Marriage Debate,’ which led university graduates to marry educated women, believing this would produce talented children. However, critics argued that this policy overlooked less-educated women. During this time, educated women were often unwilling to marry less-educated men and therefore remained unmarried, while college-educated men often preferred to marry less-educated women. To tackle this issue, the government established the Social Development Unit (SDU), which highlighted the importance of marriage and childbirth among unmarried college graduates.

Another idea was that a fusion or interaction between foreign and local people could produce something new. The government actively attracted Asian professionals and students, particularly from China and India. Foreign university graduates were given priority in government offices, as architects, and even in joining the political party, in hopes that fresh minds and ideas could spur innovation. Hence, Singapore’s early success relied on creating the fundamentals of a nation, such as economic discipline, social stability, a clean government, and the rule of law.

The second section, ‘In Search of Space: Regional and International’, has 25 subsections (Ups and Downs with Malaysia, Indonesia: From Foe to Friend, Building Ties with Thailand, the Philippines, and Brunei, etc.). In addition, communist ideology sought to disrupt Singapore’s new government and growing economy. Therefore, Singapore also maintained good relationships with neighboring countries. It played an active role in establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, which became a platform to maintain peace, economic cooperation, and social stability. During the 1970s and 1980s, Lee established good relationships with major global economic powers to attract foreign investment and signed several trade-related agreements. During this time, he interacted with many international political leaders and think tanks. By

positioning itself as a neutral and reliable member, Singapore has leveraged its strategic location and efficient government administration to attract international respect and investment.

The country also envisioned establishing itself as a global financial hub. Foreign depositors did not have to pay tax on interest income. In the 1990s, Singapore became one of the largest financial centers in the world and ranked fourth in the foreign exchange market after Tokyo, London, and New York. Consequently, GDP accounted for S\$46 billion in 1997, which was only S\$3 billion in 1965. Therefore, it can be deduced that pragmatic foreign policy, regional and global cooperation, and strategic diplomacy are necessary to connect a country to the global market.

The third section, 'Winding Up', has three subsections (Passing the Baton, My Family, and Epilogue) that reflect on Lee's eventual shift of leadership and his thoughts on the future of Singapore. He argued that good people can make a bad system better, while bad people can deteriorate a good one. According to him, a combination of qualities such as good character, determination, commitment, and courage can make a successful leader. His party continuously tried to include young university graduates. After serving as Prime Minister for 31 years, he stepped down in November 1990. The power shift was practiced carefully so that new political leaders could maintain social stability and economic growth as their predecessors did. This final section argues that knowledge is one of the most important factors in determining whether a country moves upward or downward in the long run.

Although the book was released almost 25 years ago, it could be a useful reference for politicians and policymakers in developing countries. Nepal's socioeconomic characteristics are somewhat similar to Singapore's because Nepal is a multiethnic and multiracial country and is located between two economic giants, India and China. Hence, the first method practiced by Lee could be a useful reference in the context of Nepal for resolving ethnic-related conflicts.

Second, if Nepal could upgrade its tourism sector to provide first world-level services, the country could attract thousands of tourists. In addition, if Nepal could produce at least a few First World-level garment products, it could export them to the huge markets of China and India.

Third and most importantly, Nepalese political party leaders spend many years striving to become ministers or prime ministers. However, when they come to power, they often become confused about policy intervention or resource

allocation. I claim that they have superficial knowledge of key socioeconomic issues. While politicians may read daily newspapers, this is insufficient to gain a deep understanding of complex social issues and to find solutions. Consequently, they must rely on bureaucrats, who may misguide them, resulting in the misallocation of resources. On the contrary, highly educated political leaders like Lee Kuan Yew could attend and participate in global-level seminars, review academic journal articles, and implement appropriate policies for the nation. Because of his expertise, bureaucrats would not dare to manipulate his policy interventions. Therefore, Nepalese politicians do not necessarily need to write and publish journal articles, but they should deepen their knowledge of economics, the health and education sectors, and gender issues to better understand society and implement appropriate policies.

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