



**GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND
LESSONS FROM THE SINGAPORE MODEL**

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In 1965, the dilemma faced by Lee Kuan Yew as the Prime Minister of a newly born state, Singapore, was not very different from the one faced by our Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani in 2010. At that time, Singapore, having declared independence from Great Britain in 1963 and expelled from the Malaysian Federation, was a state with bleak prospects. Michael Schuman, in his book, *The Miracle*, writes: “If Lee [in 1965] did not strengthen the economy, deliver jobs and better welfare, and thereby bolster support for the PAP [People’s Action Party] administration, the communist[s] could topple his regime”. In the words of Lee Kuan Yew himself, if things do not change fast enough in non-communist countries (Singapore included), “Asians are going to ask themselves: ‘What [does] all this free society mean? Does it mean that politicians are free to loot and plunder, that people are free to be hungry and ill-fed and ill-educated?’” Mr. Gillani – and perhaps the entire Pakistani political leadership – faces a similar situation as rising disappointment and frustration among masses is fast eroding not just the legitimacy of his government but that of the entire democratic system. Questions along the lines feared by Lee Kuan Yew have already been raised in the context of democratic government in Pakistan. Unless Mr. Gillani delivers practical results to common man very fast, these questions – which have already become a charge sheet against him and his government – may adversely affect his government and the democratic system.

It is not clear, however, whether Mr. Gillani would be inclined to go by the route Lee Kuan Yew took to strengthen his political position, government and country. In fact, Lee did all that so successfully and forcefully that he is said to be one of the longest serving elected Prime Ministers in the twentieth century, and his political party, the People’s Action Party, is today recognized as the party which has been in government for the longest period of time in recent history. The strategies pursued and decisions made by Lee Kuan Yew have been hugely controversial. Some of his policies and aspects of governance, however, have received universal acclaim. The obvious differences between the state and society of Pakistan and Singapore aside, the political leadership of Pakistan would benefit if they consider the universally acclaimed dimensions of the development model and success story of Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore. A government can strengthen itself by consistently delivering positive practical results to the common man; nothing else will suffice.

According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Report 2009-10*, Singapore's public institutions are ranked as the best in the world (out of 133 countries studied); Singapore also has world-class infrastructure (ranked 4th), leading the world in the quality of its roads, ports and air transport facilities. In addition, the country's competitiveness is propped up by a strong focus on education, providing highly skilled individuals for the workforce. Its quality of education, particularly in the fields of science and mathematics is considered the best in the world. The economic development of Singapore, and the successes of its public service, is strongly driven by a government heavily involved in a number of key sectors, such as housing, education and industry. This government intervention is driven through the Singaporean bureaucracy, considered one of the least corrupt in the world.

In 1959, when PAP first came into power, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP leadership set out with a practical five-year plan for Singapore as a self-governing state within Commonwealth, which focused not on ambitious and politically rousing goals, but on the immediate and critical needs of the people. The immediate tasks they tackled were the development of Singapore's industrial base; agriculture and fisheries; civil service reform; training of workers; strengthening of education; provision of quality healthcare; improving welfare for workers; and the empowerment of women. They realized what Mr. Gillani and his government must at this point note – the fact that state policy has to be based on the overriding objective of ensuring the survival of the nation, its continued prosperity and the well-being of its people. Words, for the Singaporean leadership, were no substitutes for action and performance. Prosperity was only possible if the party conducted itself with integrity, good character, incorruptibility, innovation, critical thinking, focused administration, teamwork and the ability to take tough decisions.

The leadership of People's Action Party in Singapore realized that the party could not rely on catering to a single ethnic or religious group in the country – the new Singapore, as they envisioned it, would be multi-ethnic and inclusive. Lacking a power base, the party realized that the path to lasting electoral success and mass support would be through a focused approach of bringing about visible change for citizens through efficient services and a dedicated, people-oriented and incorruptible party. The senior leaders worked to develop a consistent image for the party based on a close knit team that desisted from making contradictory

statements. Finally, the PAP strengthened professionals, technocrats, civil servants and public service union leaders, creating a professional unit well versed in the art of administration. These approaches ensured that the party leaders gained mass support by virtue of their appeal as effective managers and, as a result, were considered the right people to lead Singapore forward.

The Singaporean leadership faced two critical problems similar to what Pakistan currently struggles with: (i) a lack of people with managerial, administrative and technical skills, and (ii) the propensity of workers to resist hard work and pursue the common good. To combat this, the party leadership began by inculcating meritocracy and professionalism at the institutional level. Key innovations were made to government structures, as senior leadership positions began to be filled based on ability rather than seniority. Management structures were changed to enhance the capacity of government agencies to improve the quality of administrative service and talented people were recruited to public service using pay structures based on market averages. Nepotism and corruption were portrayed as a barrier to the efficiency and performance of public service and contributors to trust deficits, and were rooted out systematically. At the highest levels of decision-making, ministers and civil servants were selected on proven ability to deliver, management experience, competence and achievement.

Rather than discard the old civil service alongside outdated colonial structures, the Singaporean leadership sought to reform the bureaucracy. They saw it as an institution critical to their vision of delivering results to their citizens – the civil service planned, managed, implemented and delivered development for Singapore. At the institutional level, the structures and procedures, as well as the attitudes and behaviours of the bureaucracy, were changed to create organizational change and commitment to national development goals. Corruption was curbed immediately and the brightest citizens were attracted, using competitive compensation rates and managed using performance-driven incentives. The old image of the civil service was overhauled completely – the public sector was essentially corporatized and was refocused to deliver services on a business-like basis. Many departments were transformed to operate on a for-profit basis. In sum, the focus was on effective and efficient delivery. Budgeting, incentives, management and recruitment were all driven by performance. This has achieved long-lasting

effects and the World Economic Forum ranked Singapore's public institutions as the best in the world in 2009-10.

For Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP leadership, economic development took precedence in their reform agenda. The guiding maxim was that enough opportunities must be created so that workers would find employment in areas where they were qualified. There were three aspects to economic development in Singapore: (i) a commitment to the colonial-era economic activity that was successful in the country, such as shipbuilding; (ii) encouraging multinationals and foreign corporations to invest in Singapore and its rapidly progressing workforce; and (iii) the expansion of the manufacturing industry, which gave Singapore an advantage in exports. The Singaporeans essentially achieved their "miracle" success by creating an environment conducive to private enterprise, and using sound economic judgements to create policies that were perfectly suited to the capability and situation of the country. The subsequent economic growth – explosive in its scale and speed – generated large-scale employment and was sustained through industrialization, financing private investments, infrastructure development and the continued support of a government that did not hesitate to bolster the private sector.

The senior leadership of the PAP envisioned a Singapore that would not be dominated by a single culture or ethnic group, a passion that arose as a result of their experience in Malaysia. They sought to guarantee autonomy and equality of status to all ethnic segments with regard to culture, language and religion. At the highest levels of government and civil service, fair representation of minorities was ensured, strengthening the image of the government as non-racial and impartial. All this institutional change corresponded to the party's goal of creating a wide support base across ethnic divides and a strong desire to avoid the experience of other newly independent states, such as Pakistan and India, with ethnicity issues. To permanently embed this multiculturalism in the social order, the government engaged in planned social reengineering and played an active role in promoting and organizing group participation in social, cultural, educational and sporting activities. The aim was to create in the people of the new state a sense of national identity, leadership and dedication to country based on a firm commitment to multiracialism.

The political leadership of Pakistan must look for best practices in Asia to reinvent their agenda for development and governance. Clearly, not all policies and decisions of Lee Kuan Yew can be termed as an inspiration or would suit Pakistani context; while there is much to admire in the social democratic philosophies that Lee Kuan Yew implemented in Singapore, a key distinction will be the development of a plural, multi-party democracy in Pakistan. Unlike Singapore, Pakistan is a large region that has suffered under military dictatorship in the past that has produced violence and instability. The distinct regional needs of Pakistani citizens demand we take the best of Singapore's development model while building our own original road to long term political stability, economic success and social development.

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