

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

48 = Lucky

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By Kishore Mahbubani For The Straits Times

SINGAPORE turns 48 in 2013.

48 is a lucky number. I can say this with great personal conviction. I was born in the year 1948. And I have had a lucky life: having gone from a typical Third World childhood to a super First World living experience in one lifetime.

This is why I can say, despite the generally morose mood of the Singapore population, that we can and should celebrate a lot on our collective 48th birthday. Let me give a few examples.

First, Mr Lee Kuan Yew will turn 90 this year. Few countries have had founding fathers who have had an impact as positive as Mr Lee Kuan Yew has had on Singapore. Few also live as long as he has to see the fruits of their lifelong labours.

This is why the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy has decided to celebrate his contributions by organising, on the very day of his 90th birthday, a one-day conference on "The Big Ideas of Mr Lee Kuan Yew". Fortunately, we have been able to assemble a stellar cast of speakers for this event.

Having said this, I can well anticipate the snide reaction of some readers of this column: "What's the big deal here? Isn't it perfectly natural for the LKY School to celebrate LKY's birthday?"

Actually it is not as simple as this. When I became dean of the LKY School of Public Policy in 2004, I was explicitly told that my responsibility was to build an "LKY School of Public Policy" and not the "LKY school of thought".

For more background to this, please look at the book our school produced on its eighth anniversary.

Assessing Mr Lee's achievements

HAVING fulfilled this mission and developed an academic institution that enjoys the respect of its global peers, we are now confident that we can organise a conference on Mr Lee's ideas that will be perceived as open and objective by global standards.

No man or woman is perfect. The conference will try to produce an objective well-worded assessment of Mr Lee

and his contributions. Ultimately, history will be the final judge. But this conference will try to generate new insights. To ensure that these new insights are not lost, we will also produce a volume of the proceedings that will be edited by two young scholars, Shashi Jayakumar and Rahul Sagar.

OPINION

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A38 India will amaze when it decides to succeed A37 Is Boko the 1-Click answer for news?



More to integration than convenience

THE integrated concept to be built in Woodlands is an experimental model that might well be replicated elsewhere if successful. It is a model that is not just a physical one but also a social one. It is a model that is not just a physical one but also a social one. It is a model that is not just a physical one but also a social one.

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There's much to celebrate as Singapore turns 48. It's a good time to reflect on our strengths and weaknesses - and to count our blessings



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Second, the big celebrations of Singapore's achievements will take place on our 50th birthday in 2015. And I am glad that preparations for this have already begun.

Yet, in our 48th year, we can also step back and take stock of how far we have come. Let me state one fact that is absolutely incontrovertible: no other "newly independent" country can celebrate as many achievements as Singapore has in its first 48 years.

If anyone thinks this fact is wrong, there is only one way to prove this: name another "newly independent" country that can list as many achievements as Singapore has.

One reason why I make these sweeping statements with great confidence is that I have travelled to most corners of the world and met many global observers of Singapore.

Many are trying hard to replicate some of Singapore's achievements in their countries and are discovering how difficult it is. Many would be happy to achieve even half of Singapore's achievements. These include a safe and secure environment, multi-ethnic harmony, near universal home ownership, good health and education services and clean drinking water. Singapore is also known as a city in a garden, and has a world-class airport and airline, virtually zero unemployment, an honest civil service, cheap and good hawker food, and Electronic Road Pricing (ERP). I could obviously go on.

The ERP advantage

MANY Singaporeans will chuckle at the inclusion of ERP in the list above. Yet, the one big thing that is going to strangle many Asian cities, from Shanghai to Mumbai, and Jakarta to Bangkok, is traffic jams. The mayors of these cities would love to have ERP. Having lived in New York City for over 10 years, I was shocked that Mayor Michael Bloomberg, one of the most intelligent and dynamic mayors in the world, failed to get ERP for Manhattan. Local politics trumped simple common sense.

When intelligent mayors fail to replicate Singapore policies in otherwise intelligent cities, it demonstrates well how difficult it is for any other "newly independent country" or "old city" to replicate Singapore's achievements.

Yet, despite all this, the fact remains that we have an unhappy population. Very few citizens I speak to count their blessings. Instead, they are full of complaints. And the list of complaints is well-known: too many foreigners, a crowded and unreliable public transport system, high housing prices, and so on.

SWOT analysis

SO, THIS is my final suggestion. Let us make creative use of our 48th year. Let us make it a year of deep reflection as we prepare for our 50th birthday in 2015. Let us do a collective SWOT analysis of Singapore: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. And if we can arrive at a collective consensus on the SWOT of Singapore, we would have made a major leap forward in understanding and dealing with the unhappy psyche of the Singapore population.

To kick off this SWOT analysis, let me suggest a few bullet points to consider under each limb of the SWOT structure:

Strengths:

- Political stability;
- Ethnic harmony;
- Military and financial muscle;
- Cosmopolitan culture;
- Clean water;
- Public safety;
- World-class universities and think-tanks; and
- Regional harmony.

Weaknesses:

- Small size;
- Demographic decline;
- Emigration;
- Volatile neighbourhood; and
- Weak national identity.

Threats:

- Rising political disgruntlement;
- Weaknesses in public transport;
- Rising housing prices;
- Diminishing hope in future advancement;
- Rising resentment towards foreign talent;
- Rising competition from other Asian cities;
- Melting Arctic ice; and
- Geopolitical uncertainty.

Opportunities:

- To become the New York or London of Asia;
- Surfing the Asian cultural renaissance;
- To become the epicentre of Asian wealth management; and
- To become the intellectual and think-tank capital of Asia.

In short, like any other small state in the world, we have our fair share of strengths and weaknesses; opportunities and threats. I have no doubt that any preliminary list would have missed some key points.

Reminders, please

IF SO, I hope that readers of this column will jump in and rudely remind me of obvious points I have missed. As former culture minister S. Rajaratnam once told me, he would rather be told rude truths to polite lies. Since I am not as robust as Mr Rajaratnam, I can't say I prefer rudeness to politeness in whatever form. But I can say I will welcome both rude and polite responses. At the end of the day, as a small state, we have to deal with rude realities.

The sooner we recognise them, the better off we will be. Hence, we have no choice but to engage in deep reflection.

The LKY School will make a small contribution to this year of reflection with its conference on "The Big Ideas of Mr Lee Kuan Yew". We hope that others will also join with similar reflective events. As all the ancient sages have taught us, deep reflection is an inherently satisfying exercise. And it may even make us happy again.

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