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# The city state of Singapore braces itself for challenges to come

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## Political rumblings in Singapore can be heard, writes Kishore Mahbubani



When great men die, great changes follow. Lee Kuan Yew, who has died aged 91, will undoubtedly go down as one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century. Will Singapore outlive him?

Some may challenge his greatness. He ran only a tiny city-state. Many dismissed him as an authoritarian ruler. Yet, despite the withering

criticism he garnered in the western media, he was received with great respect in foreign capitals.

World leaders respected Mr Lee because he was a geopolitical genius. In his brutally candid manner, he would dissect the key global trends of the day and suggest wise courses of action. Vernon Walters, an American ambassador, once quipped: “Thank God that Lee Kuan Yew is the leader of a small state; otherwise, [Richard] Nixon and [Leonid] Brezhnev would hug each other for comfort.”

Mr Lee was also respected for his transformation of Singapore. He inherited a fledgling ex-British colony that was faced doom in 1965 after its expulsion from Malaysia. A city-state without a hinterland rarely will survive. Most expected Singapore to become a failed state.

Yet in fewer than 30 years, he took it (as the title of his book put it) “from third world to first”. Starting in 1965 with a per-capita income that was the same as that of Ghana, Singapore has transformed itself into a rich economy that earns more, in proportion to the size of its population, than the UK.

Still the question remains: will Singapore survive him? Samuel Huntington, political scientist, once said: “The honesty and efficiency that Senior Minister Lee has brought to Singapore are likely to follow him to his grave.”

This could happen. But, aware of his mortality, he built strong institutions. People in the know respect Singapore’s defence capabilities. The military can deploy up to 250,000 troops. The civil service, too, is a strength. Sir Michael Barber, the British government and

education expert, has said: “The Singapore civil service sets a standard of quality that in my experience is rarely matched.”

Mr Lee achieved this by pushing through a controversial scheme to retain first-rate minds in the public service by giving them high salaries comparable to those in the private sector. Singapore’s exceptional record in education, healthcare and public housing is now being emulated.

A sea of opportunities awaits this sturdy city-state. Just as London and New York served as the capital cities of the European and American centuries, Singapore can also serve as the capital city of the Asian century. It has perhaps the best airport and seaport in the world.

Its financial centre is poised to serve Asia’s middle classes. Singapore is the number one wealth management centre in Asia. The country has the best ranked university in Asia, the National University of Singapore.

Challenges remain. A big influx of foreigners into Singapore has generated anti-immigrant sentiment as public transport and housing failed to keep up with the surge. Inequality has grown. Hence the latest budget introduced some new social transfer measures; for example, schemes to share more of the benefits from economic growth with low and middle income households.

A geopolitical contest between America and China would put Singapore in a very awkward position, torn between its close defence ties with the US and ethnic affinity with China.

Internally, political rumblings can also be heard. Several government ministers experienced shock defeat in the general election in 2011 . Tony Tan barely scraped his victory in the presidential election, an unprecedented turn of events for the leading party’s preferred candidate. In short, Singapore cannot rule out the possibility that new political challenges will soon emerge.

Hence, Singapore cannot afford to be complacent. But this may well be its biggest strength. Mr Lee’s son Lee Hsien Loong, the prime minister, is fond of quoting the statement of former Intel chief executive Andy Grove: “Only the paranoid survive.”

The leaders of Singapore are aware of the big lesson of history: small city-states rarely survive a century or more. Rather than assuming that Singapore has arrived and can therefore afford to coast on autopilot, the leaders expect, and are bracing themselves, for new challenges.

Constant vigilance was a hallmark of Mr Lee’s personality. It is the trait he has embedded in Singapore.

*The writer is a professor at the National University of Singapore and author of ‘Can Singapore Survive?’*

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