

KISHORE MAHBUBANI, FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

\$5 meals, \$500 holidays and \$50k homes for SG50

Our columnist continues his monthly series of Big Ideas for the nation: Be happy for a year, when Singapore turns 50 next August. Celebrate Singapore's success - because there's practically zero chance of repeating that success in future.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

Big Idea No. 6 will seem corny at first glance. This is why it is important to read to the end of this column, especially the last paragraph, to understand its full import.

Here is the idea for my fellow Singaporeans: Let's decide to be happy for one year - from Aug 10 to next Aug 9, when it will be the 50th year of Singapore's existence. And why be happy for this one year? The reason is simple.

We have had, by any standards, an extraordinarily successful first 50 years. The chances of us being equally successful over the next 50 years are practically zero.

I will explain why later.

Since we have had a good run and are about to embark on a more difficult run, let us rest and celebrate before the hard slog. A mountaineering metaphor comes to mind. We have reached a good base camp. Before we climb to higher and more difficult altitudes, let us drink teh tarik and celebrate how far we have come.

Since so much has been written about Singapore's extraordinary success story, I will not dwell much on it. Our per capita income has gone from US\$500 in 1965 to almost US\$64,584 (S\$80,253) last year, based on purchasing power parity terms. No other nation state can match this record.

More importantly, we have had no conflict, at home or with our neighbours. Ninety per cent of our citizens live in homes they own. And we have wonderful education, health, civil service and military systems, and so on.

To understand how well-off we are, just read the following aspirations of Indians after they elected Mr Narendra Modi as their Prime Minister. Mr M. J. Akbar, a well-known journalist, asks his fellow Indians: "Why cannot we have a simple home with a toilet for every Indian family by 2022? Broadband in every village? Electricity around the clock? A clean country, rid of garbage and filth that poisons life and nature, by 2019, as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his 150th birth anniversary? These are not luxuries in the 21st century: they are bare necessities."

We have achieved everything on his list and achieved it long ago.

Yet, it is also clear that our citizens are tired of this success narrative. They remember only the difficulties of recent years: the surge of foreigners, the crowded Mass Rapid Transit trains; the long wait for Housing Board flats; the traffic jams on our highways; the soaring COE (Certificate of Entitlement) premiums and so on.

Hence, instead of approaching our 50th anniversary in a jubilant mood, there are hints of a sour mood in the air. The goal of this article is to dispel the sour mood.

Hard times ahead

PARADOXICALLY, the best way to do this is to tell Singaporeans that harder times are coming. First,

since our track record in the first 50 years was so exceptional (even freakish by most historical standards), it will be impossible to match the same success. My generation has had it exceedingly good. And I experienced it personally. I went from a three-figure monthly salary in 1971 to a five-figure salary now. My children will not experience this dizzy climb upwards.

Second, as I have said in earlier columns, we do not have enough land for each and every Singaporean to achieve the dream of the five Cs (car, condo, country club, cash and credit card). The last two we can all have. The first three we cannot all have. There isn't enough land to have millions of cars. Singapore already has one of the highest car ownership populations for a city; as of April, about 560,000 households owned at least one car each for a total of 605,184 cars.

Nor can we build condos for each Singaporean family. And the land for country clubs is shrinking. Singaporeans therefore belong to a unique tribe: They have to deal with the existential angst of not having the land to fulfil their dreams.

Third, we are losing, if we have not already lost, our first-mover advantage. We were the first to open up to global MNCs. Today every country does so. We were the first to set new global standards in services and logistics.

Dubai Airport used to describe itself as a disciple of Changi Airport. But now our disciple has a much busier airport. In the past year, 67.3 million international passengers passed through Dubai, compared with 53.1 million through Changi. Indeed, Dubai is now No. 1 in the world for international passengers, surpassing even London's Heathrow Airport.

Similarly, Emirates used to look up to Singapore Airlines for inspiration. Now it has become twice as big.

In each area that we have excelled, we will have to deal with tougher competition. That's why the next 50 years will be a harder slog.

So, let's celebrate this very special moment. And how should we celebrate? There will, of course, be many national parties in 2015. And we should participate in them heartily.

But let us also celebrate at the individual level. Let us appreciate some unique and simple joys that all Singaporeans, rich and poor, can enjoy together. Let me cite some simple pleasures we can indulge in (and since we are celebrating our 50th birthday, I am using the number five in each category).

A toast to \$5 meals

FIRST, Singapore is one of the few developed countries where one can get good meals at less than \$5 per head. It took a colleague of mine, who recently arrived in Singapore, to remind me of this exceptional gift we have.

Mr Steve LaNasa used to be the president of Donnelly College in Kansas. Since coming to Singapore with his wife and two children, aged 10 and 13, in early January, he has been taking his children out to hawker centre after hawker centre. And he is absolutely amazed at the good-quality food you can enjoy in Singapore at such astonishingly low prices.

He says: "Despite the fact that 'fast food' is ubiquitous throughout the United States, it's nearly impossible to find good, healthy prepared food at convenient locations, and what is available certainly isn't worth what you pay for it."

Sometimes it takes a foreigner to remind us that we live in a food paradise. Why not indulge in this food paradise for less than \$5 a head and toast Singapore each time we do so?

\$500 holidays

SECOND, Singapore is fortunate to be situated in the most diverse cultural environment of our entire planet, South-east Asia. No other region can claim to have all the world's leading civilisations and religions living in relative harmony in such close proximity to one another. Many middle-class people from all over the world spend thousands of dollars to appreciate the special beautiful attractions of South-east Asia.

So for one year, let us stop dreaming of going to London or Paris, New York or Orlando. Instead, for less than \$500 a head, we can experience magnificent historical sites and some of the most hospitable

cultures on our planet.

I hope that my next book will be on South-east Asia. Its tentative title is The Most Blessed Corner Of The World. We Singaporeans are truly blessed to be situated in the heart of this blessed corner. Let us enjoy it for one year very cheaply with \$500 holidays.

\$50,000 homes

MY THIRD suggestion will be both controversial and difficult. It is very difficult to buy a decent- sized condo unit for less than \$1 million in Singapore. Yet, we can buy a small home somewhere in South-east Asia for less than \$50,000. Ultimately, this may be the best solution to the existential angst of living in Singapore. We can experience the freedom of space in our neighbouring countries if we cannot experience it in Singapore.

In looking for cheap properties in rural areas, we will simply be emulating the normal behaviour of citizens who live in crowded cities and look for homes in rural areas in South-east Asia within easy reach via budget airlines.

Let me add another truly outrageous suggestion. Why don't we encourage our rich developers, who have profited from 50 years of economic growth in Singapore to develop projects selling \$50,000 homes in South-east Asia to fellow Singaporeans? The Government can also step in to help as it will make many Singaporeans happier.

And why is happiness important? I believe that the most important goal for Singapore in the next 50 years will not be economic growth or political stability. Instead, it will be social resilience.

Only strong social resilience will carry us through the inevitable stresses and strains Singapore will encounter in the next five decades. Happiness does not just help at the individual level. Happy societies are also more resilient societies. We have had a happiness deficit for some time. Let us party for one year and build up our happiness quotient. After that, we will be ready for the more challenging five decades coming our way.

Postscript

IN MY column on April 12, I wrote: "Hence, for 2015, when we celebrate our 50th anniversary, I hope that one of Singapore's philanthropists will award a \$500,000 prize for the best history book written on Singapore."

I am pleased to inform Straits Times readers that an anonymous donor has contacted me to support a project to promote a deeper understanding of Singapore's history in future generations of Singaporeans and the world.

He has agreed to donate \$500,000 for this Singapore history project prize. The money will go towards an endowment fund whose interest will be used to support a book prize every three years. He told me he became a Singapore citizen this year, even though he has lived here for many years. He would like to do something for Singapore.

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The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He was named one of the top 50 world thinkers this year by Prospect magazine, a British publication.

'One medic kept a calendar of me for three years'