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THINK-TANK
Can Singapore fail?

By Kishore Mahbubani

I HAVE just finished writing an article for the Wilson Quarterly, an American journal, on the topic, Can America Fail? The opening paragraph reads as follows: 'In 1981, Singapore's long-ruling People's Action Party was shocked when it suffered its first defeat at the polls in many years, even though the contest was in a single constituency. I asked Dr Goh Keng Swee, one of Singapore's three great founding fathers and the architect of Singapore's economic miracle, why the PAP lost. He replied, 'Kishore, we failed because we did not even conceive of the possibility of failure.'

The simple truth is that any society can fail. America is vulnerable. So too is Singapore. And as Dr Goh perceived, the only way to prevent failure is to conceive of failure.

The aim of this article is to stimulate Singaporeans into thinking how Singapore might fail. Let me emphasise that I do not believe Singapore is going to fail. But to ensure it does not fail, we must think of how it might fail. Such thinking is absolutely essential as we sail through the biggest economic storm the world has experienced since the Great Depression. I have come to the paradoxical conclusion that Singapore's greatest strengths may also be the source of its greatest vulnerabilities.

One of Singapore's greatest strengths is that it is the world's most globalised nation. The Foreign Policy magazine has a globalisation index. Singapore ranks No.1. There is no doubt that Singapore has succeeded in a spectacular fashion because it has been the best surfer on the tidal wave of globalisation.

But what happens to the Singapore economy if we move from an era of globalisation to an era of de-globalisation? De-globalisation has not arrived. However, there are early warning signals of its possibility.

Earlier this month, The Washington Post painted a gloomy picture of the global recession, noting that many countries were now entering a period of de-globalisation with plummeting world trade. It noted that Singapore's predicament was that it faced an 'ebbing of a golden age of trade, innovation, wealth accumulation and poverty reduction through globalisation'.

Against this backdrop, we should heed Dr Goh's advice and conceive of the possibility of globalisation failing. And if it fails, how does Singapore avoid failure?

Another of Singapore's big strengths is good governance. In May this year, Singapore will celebrate its 50th anniversary of good governance, since self-government in 1959. As an amateur student of politics who has travelled around the world, I cannot think of any other developing nation that has enjoyed 50 years of good governance.

Singapore is unique; good governance is not the historical norm. Every society in the world, without exception, has experienced bad governance. Inevitably, Singapore will experience it some day. Can Singaporean society cope with bad governance? Can we ever conceive of the possibility of Singapore experiencing bad governance?

The best way of preparing for bad governance is for the population to rely less on the government to provide solutions and to rely more on individual citizens to find solutions. But the unfortunate corollary of good governance is that Singaporeans have come to rely on the Government to solve their problems.

Let me provide one small but significant example: Singapore is one of the cleanest cities in the world. But this happens because we employ an army of cleaners. Few Singaporeans take personal responsibility to remove litter. I see this most vividly when I go running in the East Coast Park after a weekend. Mountains of rubbish are left thoughtlessly everywhere. One way to create a greater sense of responsibility is for each citizen to take individual responsibility for litter. Each citizen should pick up at least one piece of litter each day. If we cannot even pick up our own litter, can we prepare ourselves for the day when more individual responsibility would be needed?

A third strategic strength of Singapore is our ethnic harmony. Indeed, it is remarkable what Singapore has achieved in this area. One of my favourite comparisons is the following: The British Empire left behind several small multiracial colonies in all corners of the world, including Guyana, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Fiji. Only one has experienced continuous ethnic harmony since independence: Singapore. Can we fail in this area?

The older generation of Singaporeans has fully absorbed the virtues of ethnic harmony. I experienced that when I accompanied then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on an official visit to Malaysia. We stayed in the official residence, Carcosa. One day, the Malaysian butler asked Mr Goh what he would like for breakfast. He expected Mr Goh to choose either a Chinese or English breakfast. To his amazement, Mr Goh said: 'Get me thosai from Brickfields.'

Mr Goh's generation of English-educated Singaporeans has a near total blindness to ethnic differences. I am not sure that the younger generation of Singaporeans can match this. Some of the anecdotal evidence I have heard suggests that the younger generation of Singaporeans are more aware of their ethnic differences, partly because of the segregation caused by our second-language policies. Modern sociological methods of research can tell us whether ethnic harmony is growing or diminishing over time in Singapore. This is one area we need to monitor carefully, if we want to look for possible causes of Singapore failing.

I have suggested only three possible ways how Singapore might fail. The likelihood is that if Singapore fails, the failure will be due to a completely unanticipated cause. Ironically, Singapore is a legend in military history because it provides a textbook example of how things can go badly wrong when you don't think of alternative ways of failing. The British expected a Japanese naval attack on Singapore from the south. Instead, the Japanese came on bicycles from the north. The British discovered too late that their big guns were pointed in the wrong direction. Winston Churchill and other British leaders were shocked when the supposedly invincible

fortress of Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942. Having fallen once as a result of a complete surprise, can we fail again?

Pray let us not give any future historian occasion to say of Singapore: 'They failed because they did not even conceive of the possibility of failure.'

The writer is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.

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