Kishore Mahbubani: July 13 opinion

SINGAPOREANS should send a thank you note to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for taking on responsibility for the haze in Singapore. This gesture, and apologising for it, demonstrates why Dr Yudhoyono is perceived to be a global statesman.

At the same time, we should also send a thank you note to the Indonesian minister, Mr Agung Laksono, who said: "Singapore should not be behaving like a child and making all this noise."

Why thank Mr Agung? He frankly reminded us that there is a significant section of the Indonesian elite who do not have a sympathetic view of Singapore.

This is a long-term political reality we will also have to deal with. The physical haze may be gone in a few months but the political haze we have to live with will linger on.

The big question is: What can we do to dispel both the physical haze and the political haze? Who do we turn to for answers?

The short answer is the famous Italian writer of the 15th and 16th centuries (1469-1527), Niccolo Machiavelli. Most people associate his name with cunning and evil. A leader who is described as Machiavellian does not take it as a compliment. Yet all this shows a fundamental misunderstanding of his writing.

As a student of philosophy at Dalhousie University in Canada, I learnt from my professor, David Braybrooke, that while it is true that Machiavelli advised us to be shrewd, he advised us to be shrewd so that we could do good, not evil.

This goal was to enhance virtu, a Latin word which has a larger meaning than virtue. Those who want to understand Machiavelli better can read Isaiah Berlin's 1971 classic essay on him in the New York Review Of Books.

To be shrewd and generous

LET me suggest three ways in which Singapore can be shrewd and do good at the same time.

There is an old adage which is found in nearly every religion in the world: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Clearly all Singaporeans would like the people of Sumatra to think of the people of Singapore before they set off fires. To demonstrate why they should think of us, we should lead the way by thinking of them.

One spectacular gesture that Singaporeans could have made at the height of the haze would have been to send some masks to the people in Sumatran towns which were affected by the haze even more than Singapore.

We need not have taken the masks from the supply here. They are available for purchase globally. We could have bought some from overseas and shipped them to the affected towns.

Given the huge amount of anger among Singaporeans at the height of the haze, it would have been politically suicidal for any politician to suggest this.

Yet, for the long-term survival of Singapore, we need to have strong citizen voices who can speak the unspeakable in moments of anger.

To understand how difficult it is to do the right thing, look at the anger Dr Yudhoyono suffered at the hands of his people when he apologised to Singapore.

The second way to be shrewd and do good is to think long-term about the haze problems. To grasp this point, just ask yourself a simple question: What could Singapore have done immediately after the first major haze in 1997 to prevent a recurrence of the haze in 2013? How could we have used the past 16 years better?

The simple answer is that we could have done a lot.

I am a great believer in education. An educated citizenry behaves better than an ignorant citizenry.

Singapore has one of the best education systems in the world. Schools in California have adopted Singapore textbooks. If we share the fruits of our educational systems with children in California, how much of it could we have shared with children in Sumatra?

If, say, we had handed out books in Bahasa Indonesia explaining the dangers of the haze to 10- year-olds in 1998, then those children would now be 25 years old and working in the fields.

And if we had engaged in poverty eradication efforts then, it would have had an even greater impact.

The people can be educated.

Can oil palm plantation owners also be educated? The short answer is yes. There is a rising tide of global norms encouraging companies to be responsible.

A key driver of these global norms is Professor John Ruggie of Harvard, who worked with Mr Kofi Annan on the "Global Compact", 10 universally accepted principles in human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption for responsible businesses to adhere to.

Prof Ruggie spoke at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on June 11. He addressed the Indonesian Parliament the very next day.

It was a pity he came just before the haze. If he had come during the haze, he could have discussed the global norms that oil palm plantation managers in Indonesia would have to conform to.

In short, these are global forces that we can use to our advantage.

This can also be demonstrated in the third way we can be shrewd and do good. The best thing that can happen to Singapore's long- term future is for our Asean neighbours to take on board the notion of "sustainable development".

Fortunately, there is a global movement to promote "Sustainable Development Goals" (SDGs).

The United Nations Secretary- General, Mr Ban Ki Moon, has made an effort to launch SDGs when the UN "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs) expire in 2015. Three global leaders have been chosen to spearhead this effort: Dr Yudhoyono, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Some institutions in Singapore have already committed themselves to promoting SDGs. One such institution is the National University of Singapore (NUS). It is an asset that NUS has high standing regionally and globally. We can now use this enhanced global reputation to serve Singapore's long-term interests.

One early way is to set up a Centre for Sustainable Development at NUS. It could promote intensive research on the subject as well as promote best practices in this area through short-term executive education (EE) courses.

The Lee Kuan Yew School alone has educated over 10,000 people in its EE courses. Just imagine the impact if 10,000 more were educated in sustainable development courses.

Private wealth, public good

THERE is only one problem. All this requires money. When money is mentioned, the automatic answer of many Singaporeans is: "Our rich Government can take care of it."

Yes, the Government can do so. However, if it did so, the sense of ownership of sustainable

development will not be felt by Singaporeans.

To engineer a change of attitude to the haze problem, we need more "bottom-up" initiatives to match "top-down" initiatives in dealing with long-term challenges like it.

A study by the Boston Consulting Group said that Singapore had more millionaires per capita than any other country in 2012, totalling 17 per cent of the population. These millionaires have a choice: Will they choose to be passive in response to the haze or will they choose to be active and do good by supporting the "Centre for Sustainable Development" in Singapore to protect their lungs?

And yes, I can anticipate the reactions of many readers to this article.

Many will say: "How shrewd of Kishore to use this haze to raise money for the NUS."

That is precisely the point of this article: To do good, you have to be shrewd.

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