

# Multi-democracy Parties: Modi, Lee and Impermanence of Power

## The Needle's Eye



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This column will be published exactly ten months after Narendra Modi took office in South Block. It is as good a time as any to think of Lee Kuan Yew, whose funeral Modi will attend next Sunday, and of Singapore and India and their fates and futures.

Lee was a strongman in every sense of that word, but also a statesman whose image was deeply etched in his country's culture, values, image, status, and wealth. Lee had Herculean stamina and Socratic foresight. He was authoritarian; he was ruthless in stamping out opposition; he was emphatic that Western concepts of democracy and free speech did not work in Asia.

Alongside its poorer neighbours, Singapore has long enjoyed first-world infrastructure. Its buildings are modern, its concert halls, convention centres and casinos state-of-the-art, its airport a joy to

transit through. Its residents travel from air-conditioned homes in air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned workplaces, malls, and clubs.

Despite one dominant community, the Chinese, and two potentially turbulent minorities, the Malays and the Indians, there is no ghettoization. Public housing is a careful blend of the three races.

Schoolchildren are sieved into layers of competence and excellence; the best win government scholarships to study at the best universities abroad, but they have to sign bonds and return to Singapore to work. Young males are compulsorily put through two years of national service. Civil servants and ministers are paid private-sector salaries.

Favouritism there is, even the glint of nepotism, but corruption is absent. Drug trafficking is punishable by death, vandalism by public caning and humiliation. Crime wins harsh retribution, and the streets are safe for girls and women at all hours. You could think it is a police state, but you very rarely see police on the streets. Yet you know you are under watch. You are encouraged to report on suspicious neighbours, especially after 9/11. It is a fine city-state, with fines for everything – spitting, chewing gum, jaywalking.

Singapore is only one degree north of the equator, so the sun rises and sets at the same times every day. It could have been a malarial swamp

with no natural resources and a very brief life span. Although Lee fretted about Singapore's survival, it stands sturdy exactly fifty years after independence, full of street smarts, always prepared to seize the next business opportunity, and ready to take on all comers with the knuckle-dusters that its founder boasted of.

Lee would have got along well with a Modi in power. They shared many traits, chiefly their dreams of development, their intolerance for dissent, and their insistence on doing business their way. Modi is a smarter politician in some ways. He has stayed on top in a multi-party democracy. His test-tube is crammed with 1.25 billion people while Lee's only had 5.6 million, one-quarter of them expatriates who keep Singapore humming as a financial centre. Modi is a voracious presence on social media, which he has used brilliantly to by-pass the mainstream press in India. He did find the time to grant a long interview to a Seychelles newspaper on his recent trip. There, he said the most important lesson life had taught him was "From my hardships, a heart that works and hands that deliver."

On Tuesday, when the Supreme Court struck down the dreaded Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, Modi was urging his 10.9 million followers to sign up to get his tweets by SMS on their phones. He is likely to pull a good

Lee memory out of his hat in Singapore: earlier this month he surprised the leader of the opposition in Mauritius with an old photograph of them together in the 1990s.

Modi, whose demeanour, like Lee's, has been one of barely-contained contempt for his political foes, can trim his sails if the wind is rough. Parliament's month-long session was one of the most productive in a long while. Modi managed to get five of the six pieces of legislation he had issued by way of ordinance passed by both houses – no mean feat given his minority in the upper house and the heat and dust kicked up by the Land Acquisition amendment bill. On Section 66A, the government first defended its restrictions on free speech on the internet

and then, when the verdict came in, protested that it was for free speech all along.

You could see that Modi would dearly wish to be cast in a Lee mould – master of all he surveys in a single-party autocracy. That is not going to happen, but the Bharatiya Janata Party is at least less fractious than the 14 opposition parties that marched to the presidential palace, led by Sonia Gandhi, to protest against the land bill. Congress in particular is a travesty of the independence party it once was. Talking of ordinances, let us not forget Rahul Gandhi's dramatic trashing of the Congress's ordinance on convicted lawmakers one and a half years ago when he said he had been fed

the political line that "we need to do this because of political considerations. Everybody is doing this. The Congress does this, the BJP does this... It is time to stop this nonsense."

Indeed, it is time to stop the nonsense of Rahul Gandhi, cosseted by taxpayer money devoid of a single day of administrative experience, disdainful of accountability, a putative leader who disappears on an unending absence in a secret location – Myanmar? Cambodia? The Himalayas? – while his mother steps back into a leadership role in a party that threw economic sense to the winds in pursuit of a simplistic, hypocritical, and profligate mission to rid India of its poverty.

That poverty is not going to vanish soon unless Modi stops tinkering at the edges of his development agenda and homes in on making India a truly friendly investment destination. No time to lose therefore on ending tax terrorism, which has reared its ugly head again with the retrospective claims against oil explorer Cairn. No time to lose on strengthening government revenues with the Goods and Services Tax, which may not be the cake-walk the finance ministry makes it out to be. No time to lose on reforms either as the International Monetary Fund's Christine Lagarde warned earlier this month. Modi and India have been lucky

these past ten months. Low oil prices, falling inflation, and comfortable foreign-exchange reserves have fed a dangerous complacency.

Lagarde noted that soft monetary policies in the developed world funnelled huge foreign capital inflows of \$470 billion into India between 2009 and 2012. But the party is about to end. The US Federal Reserve is on the verge of raising interest rates. When that happens, foreign funds will fly back to old climes. "The reforms initiated here in India are therefore going in the right direction, are very timely, but will also need to be pursued with the utmost speed," Lagarde said in a Mumbai speech.

Singapore, too, is watching the Fed uneasily. Its GDP grew by only 2.9 per cent last year, and its trade and investment are sluggish. Lee Kuan Yew's death is sure to trigger quicker political change. In the 2011 elections, opposition groups won an unprecedented six of the 87 seats in the island's parliament. Singaporeans are now openly and more frequently demanding free speech. Lee's iron fist had loosened. It has now fallen away. Total power cannot last forever. Narendra Modi will do well to ponder this as he watches Lee's cortege this weekend.

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