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History-Singaporeans (News Focus)

SINGAPOREANS LOOKING BACK FOR ANSWER TO FUTURE

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SINGAPORE, Aug 13 (Bernama) -- After 31 years of independence and poised on the threshold of entering the ranks of developed nations in the near future, Singaporeans are suddenly concerned about their past.

Or, to be exact, their absence of knowledge about their past.

Deputy Prime Minister Brigadier General (R) Lee Hsien Loong lamented that there was a serious gap in the education of young Singaporeans and that efforts must be made to imbue Singaporeans with a sense of the nation's history.

"We have not imbued in them where they came from and where they are heading to," he told Malaysian journalists on a five-day visit to the republic recently.

He was asked to comment on his father and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's musings on the possibility of Singapore re-merging with Malaysia. In June this year, Lee in reply to a question at a Singapore Press Club dinner had painted a scenario under which Singapore might rejoin Malaysia if certain conditions were right for it to do so.

The conditions include Malaysia adopting the same policy of meritocracy as Singapore, without any race being in a privileged position, and if Malaysia pursues as successfully the same goals as Singapore to bring maximum economic benefit to its people.

Such a scenario, said the Senior Minister, if it ever came about, would take some time. Lee, 72, was Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990. Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 together with Sabah and Sarawak but was evicted in 1965.

The younger Lee said: "It is only the observation of the senior Minister to promote economic development. Eventually, it is possible. He is only thinking aloud.

"It is not a bad thing to remind Singaporeans of the reality that underpins Singapore -- how Singapore prospers. What they have seen is the success, how it comes about, and how it is possible. They did not live through the events of their old generation."

Intentionally or unintentionally, a mass drama held in conjunction with the republic's National Day celebration themed "My Singapore My Home" at its stadium erased that significant episode in history when Singapore was a part of Malaysia.

BG Lee, who was asked on an observation from a Malaysian journalist, said he did not have a hand in the script and he was only present at the stadium that night. He agreed that it should be included in the drama.

The script, written by Professor Edwin Thumboo of the University of Singapore, traced its early beginnings as an immigrant society to the more recent search for a national identity.

Senior Minister Lee's thoughts prompted vehement reactions in Malaysia but reactions in Singapore were muted.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did not rule out the possibility of Singapore rejoining Malaysia one day. He said the projection by the Senior Minister might become a reality when all the races in Malaysia had developed self-confidence and the capability to compete.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded Lee in 1990, was quoted recently as saying that reunification was not on his agenda. "My political agenda with regard to Malaysia is to look for ways where we can work together to mutually help each other achieve developed economy

status," he told reporters.

In his National Day message, Goh said: "After 31 years, more important than our economic success and the improvements in our lives, is the beginning of a Singaporean identity and nation."

Generally, Singapore leaders agreed they have not made concerted efforts to remind Singaporeans of their past as many felt that the painful circumstances in which Singapore was ousted from Malaysia were best forgotten.

The government, they said, learnt lessons from the 1964 riots so that in 1969 when there were racial riots in Malaysia, Singapore was not seriously affected.

Tracing the history, Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had on May 27, 1961 proposed closer political and economic cooperation between the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo (later Sabah) and Brunei in the form of a merger.

The main terms of the merger, agreed on by him and Lee Kuan Yew, were to have central government responsibility for defence, foreign affairs and internal security, but local autonomy in matters pertaining to education and labour.

A referendum on the terms of the merger held in Singapore on Sept 1, 1962 supported Lee's People's Action Party's (PAP) plan to go ahead with the merger.

Malaysia was formed on Sept 16, 1963, and consisted of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo. Brunei opted to stay out. Indonesia and the Philippines opposed the merger. President Sukarno of Indonesia worked actively against it during the three years of Indonesian Confrontation.

The merger with Singapore was short-lived. Singapore was separated from the rest of Malaysia on Aug 19, 1964, and became a sovereign, democratic and independent nation.

Singapore was admitted to the United Nations on Sept 21, 1965 and became a member of the Commonwealth on Oct 15, 1965. On Dec 22, 1965, it became a republic with Yusof Ishak as the republic's first president. --
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